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The Paradox of Self Surrender and Self  
Empowerment: An Interpretative  
Phenomenological Investigation of the  
Individual's Understanding of the Higher Power in  
Alcoholics Anonymous.

Submitted to the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University  
Psychology Department in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Marc Medina

June 2012, London, United Kingdom

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank all at the New School, my supervisor, Pnina and Emmy for making it possible to study existential psychotherapy at a doctoral level. Above all this is for Paul and made possible by Paul, whose love, patience, guidance, self sacrifice and belief in me has sustained me through this endeavour, as it has done during the last 25years. Thank you Paul, I love you.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to examine how long term recovery from addiction within the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) paradigm impacts upon the everyday lives of the participants; the choices they make, the difficulties they encounter and their felt sense of personal freedom. The sceptical view of AA is that the price of this recovery is the loss of an independent or strong self that becomes subsumed in the group-think and overtaken by the need to surrender to a Higher Power. For this reason it has traditionally been assumed that psychotherapy and AA are fundamentally antithetic, one promoting the self and the other calling for self surrender. This qualitative research has sought to understand more about the sober self by interviewing six long term sober AA members (average length of sobriety 16 years) using semi structured interviews and analysing the resulting data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results indicated that rather than losing themselves or their sense of agency, these participants have overcome their alcoholic selves and emerged as more responsible, empowered, connected and free selves. This paradox of self surrender and self empowerment is explored further as is the resonance between the spiritu-philosophical basis of AA and the insights that underpin existential psychotherapy. This study can contribute towards a deeper understanding of the nature of long term sobriety and further research is suggested that focuses on attitudes towards AA amongst psychotherapists and psychologists, and the operationalization of the process of handing over and recognising personal limitations. The clinical significance of this research lies in its attempt to increase understanding, specifically amongst existential psychotherapists, regarding the potential congruence of attending AA and engaging in existential psychotherapy and also allowing those in the addiction community to understand more about the parallels that exist between AA and this philosophically grounded branch of psychotherapy.

## **Keywords**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Alcoholics Anonymous, Addiction, Sobriety, Self surrender, Higher Power, Existential psychotherapy

## **Statement of Authorship**

This dissertation is written by Marc Medina and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor of Existential Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy. The author reports no conflicts of interest, and is alone responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation.



## **Anonymisation and transcript conventions**

The transcripts herein were edited for the purpose of preserving anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

### **Transcript notation**

...	Significant pause
[ ]	Material and/or name omitted
[says angrily]	Additional material or my summary
<b>Word Count</b>	43,887

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

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*“Once we accept our limits, we go beyond them”*

*Albert Einstein*

The aim of this study is to examine how long term recovery from addiction within the AA paradigm impacts upon the everyday lives of the participants; the choices they make, the difficulties they encounter and their felt sense of personal freedom. For many people enjoying a drink is just that, enjoying a drink. For some however drinking develops into a relationship with alcohol which contains some very negative and harmful characteristics. These include compulsion, engulfment, dangerous risk taking, sharp mood swings, low self esteem, isolation, life avoidance and negatively impacting on the lives of friends and loved ones. This relationship has become generally known as an addictive relationship which is often characterised by the individual experiencing extreme difficulty with sustaining motivation and will power to give up drinking and/or deceiving themselves that they simply need to cut back on the level and frequency of their alcohol intake. Since its foundation, helping those who want to help themselves overcome this addiction to alcohol has been the *raison d’être* of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), whose programme for recovery, centred on twelve key steps, has become regarded by many as being the most successful route to long term drinking cessation.

Despite the extensive literature, most studies consider short term recovery periods rather than the challenges and processes involved in achieving and sustaining long-term recovery. This study is therefore directed towards privileging the voices of the long term sober participants, based on a belief that their views and opinions are valuable sources of knowledge in understanding AA, addiction, recovery, well being, self surrender and spirituality.

A surrender to and an acceptance of a Higher Power (God, spirituality, or otherness) is viewed as a fundamental aspect of an individual's membership of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the foundation of their continued sobriety. In terms of specific focus, this research is consequently aimed at providing an opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the acceptance of a Higher Power as the means by which six individuals, who identify as alcoholics, overcame what they felt to be their uncontrollable urge to drink in the long term and in so doing, transformed the way they live their lives. As described in further detail under the reflexivity heading in the methodology section of this study, my interest in this aspect of recovery from addiction has emanated from two key sources. Firstly, my psychotherapeutic work with clients who self define as recovering alcoholics and attend AA meetings as well as engaging in therapy. And secondly, from knowing some long term sober AA members socially and engaging in some in depth conversations concerning the dynamics of sobriety as identified in AA and more specifically the extent to which they consider not drinking to be a personal achievement.

Through both a phenomenological and interpretative engagement with the interview transcripts, a key objective of this qualitative study is also to gain an appreciation of the extent to which the Higher Power is a personal creation for each participant and how the experience of surrendering to it, for many years, has changed the way they see themselves, others and the world around them. It is also envisaged that this piece of research may add something new to the body of knowledge in this area and in so doing impact upon contemporary discussion in the existential and wider psychotherapeutic communities, as well as in AA, about potential co-understandings concerning this route to overcoming addiction and achieving emotional well being that may have been overlooked thus far. Accordingly this study will begin with a review of existing literature and research before moving on to a thorough explication of the research methodology and its relevance to this particular research question. The results will then be presented, analysed and discussed before conclusions are drawn, which will also include

comment upon the quality and validity of the work as well as critical reflections, suggestions for further research and implications for clinical practice.

## **Chapter 2      Literature Review**

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The idea that human beings can ‘be’ or feel like they ‘are’ addicted to a substance has, for a long time now, fascinated, baffled and challenged psychological researchers, clinicians, social commentators, philosophers and theologians as well as sufferers and others affected by their condition. Consequently there is significant corpus of literature in the field of addiction that is continually being added to. This review therefore focuses on the extant work that has stimulated and contextualised this specific research question. Evaluating these contributions has also pointed towards gaps or opportunities for further understandings in the constellation of ideas centred around alcoholism, recovery, spirituality, Alcoholics Anonymous and the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment.

### **2.1      Alcoholics Anonymous**

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 by two men, Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, who became known as Bill W. and Dr. Bob. It was formed as an alliance to help people help themselves to stop drinking and maintain sobriety and had its roots in the Oxford Group, a religious movement in the United States and England, which offered its members the opportunity of profound personal change through evangelical Christian conversion. Since its inception AA has grown into a world wide social organisation consisting of autonomous local groups where change is based upon interpersonal relationships and adherence to a model for recovery from alcoholism based on twelve key steps. These steps are a set of spiritual concepts and practices first described in Alcoholics Anonymous which was written by Bill W. in 1939 and is referred to by AA members as the Big Book. AA encourages members to work with a more experienced member, called a sponsor, to take the prescribed twelve steps



(Matheson and McCollum 2008). Alexander (2008) suggests that whilst it is easy to stereotype twelve step literature, most members use the written doctrine for what it's worth and move beyond it when they feel they need to. He also comments that most impressive of all is the human warmth that fills the twelve step meeting room and the amazing patience shown to those who relapse, who are always welcome to begin again (Alexander 2008).

Spirituality and the related externalization of control are major foci of the AA programme of recovery (Murray, Malcarne and Goggin 2003). The first three of the twelve steps that AA members are asked to embrace state that, we "admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable", we "came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" and that we have "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him". Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p59). The key therefore to managing alcoholism in AA is between each person and his or her Higher Power. The individual's Higher Power may be God, the AA group, or any other conception of something larger than one's self (Cain 1991). Spirituality has been differentiated from religiosity in AA with spirituality being about personal belief in contrast to religion's focus on specific belief systems and dogma (Berenson 1990, cited in Murray et al. 2003). This externalisation of control is coupled with an insistence that addicted people learn to acknowledge complete responsibility for their problems. Lifelong abstinence from addictive practice is also required, based on the belief that the least slip in abstinence restores the addiction to its strongest form (Alexander 2008).

Consequently, although it clearly has important social, behavioural and cognitive components (MacCrady and Irvine 1989), AA is fundamentally a spiritual programme in that it is not so much a treatment, but a way of living and being (Miller and Kurtz 1994) based on the idea that alcoholic drinking is a reflection of the human need for spiritual life and growth gone wrong. In writing about AA and whilst acknowledging that spirituality is notoriously difficult to define and

operationalize, Swora seeks to define it as a “field of meaning and action that is fundamentally social in nature, linguistically mediated and characterized by a manner of attending to the sacred” (2004 p188). Spirituality in AA has thus been differentiated from religiosity with the emphasis being on personal experience of the sacred rather than hierarchical structures of religious leaders (Berenson 1990). Accordingly, whilst the sole purpose of AA is to help alcoholics become and stay sober, the programme attends to much more than the mere imbibing of alcohol which is only mentioned in the first of the twelve steps (Miller and Kurtz 1994). The remaining steps are concerned with spiritual processes around knowledge of and relationship with a Higher Power, self searching, confession, openness and making amends (Miller and Kurtz 1994). Sobriety as opposed to not drinking is therefore something that is striven for and grown into as opposed to being attained at the point of drinking cessation.

Although not ‘picking up’ a drink is the desired and fundamental outcome, achieving long term sobriety and staying in the ‘rooms’ (the collective term for AA meetings) involves the individual AA member in much more than achievement of this one vital behaviour change. As Cain describes, “it is a transformation of their identities, from drinking non-alcoholics to non-drinking alcoholics, and it affects how they view and act in the world. It requires not only a particular understanding of the world but a new understanding of their selves and their lives, and a reinterpretation of their own past” (1991, p210). Similarly, in his analysis of alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous, Bateson (1972a) addresses the metamorphosis that AA members must undergo as a change in epistemology whilst Swora (2004) recognises that healing in AA terms is not a cure as such but rather a new way of attending to the world. In conjunction with ‘step work’ (working through the twelve steps with guidance from a sponsor), personal story telling in AA meetings is the primary way in which sobriety is not only transmitted but also grown into (O’Connell 1991 cited in Schaler 2000). Kurtz (1988) describes the four key spiritual elements to these stories as ‘release’, ‘gratitude’, ‘humility’ and ‘tolerance’: ‘Release’

pertains to truth telling, 'gratitude' refers to the being free from active alcoholism, 'tolerance' involves the appreciation of individual difference and 'humility' is about telling one's story of trouble in life particularly with alcohol (Schaler 2000). Several social and behavioural scientists have noted that AA life stories mediate between individual and community identities (Cain 1991, Humphreys 2000, Swora 2001) and act as a vehicle of identity acquisition through understanding more about AA propositions by listening to others, encoding a model of what it means to be an alcoholic and seeing the story as a mediating device for self understanding (Cain 1991)

Since its inception AA has steadily emerged as the treatment of choice for those seeking recovery from addiction to alcohol. In 1990 in the US alone, 3.75 million people reported attending AA and in the same study 22.6 million said they had attended AA meetings at some point in their lives (Room 1995). Smale (2010) recognises that there is clearly something about AA that is attracting large numbers of people and points towards Barbour and Del Boca's research (2003, cited in Smale 2010) which suggests that involvement in AA is predictive of better recovery outcomes. He goes on to observe that despite this many books on addiction counselling still contain no reference to AA and some within the psychotherapeutic community are openly hostile to the movement and its ideas (Denning 2000, Peele and Bufe 2000, Velleman 1992, all cited in Smale 2010). Others such as Schaler (2000), Bufe (1991) and Chappel (1992) have criticised AA for its spiritual emphasis and seen it as being coercive, pietistic and even cultish (Swora 2004). These criticisms are often levelled by evidence based medicine (e.g. Snow, Prochaska and Rossi 1994) and are borne out of a frustration with AA's emphasis on the ineffable and thus unmeasurable (Swora 2004) and its core insistences on essential limitation and mutuality. Other commentators have responded by saying that AA's intellectual and social significance cannot be ignored (Kurtz 1982), that there is no hierarchical structure, official doctrine or declaration of faith in AA

(Swora 2004) and that the twelve step movement has enjoyed enormous success in this era specifically because its members are able to retain theological independence (Alexander 2008). Snow et al. (1994) conclude that “illuminating the role of spirituality in addiction change represents a major task that will require the input of behavioural scientists, theologians and AA members” (p369). This research has sought to fill part of the gap in the literature by starting from the bottom up and allowing long standing members to describe how and why their programme works for them.

## **2.2 Theories of addiction**

Addiction is a “complex and multifaceted phenomenon” (McIntosh and McKeganey 2001 p47) and over the years numerous researchers, clinicians and commentators from various disciplines have sought to understand more about its etiology, nature and dynamics. Many of these formulations have involved taking extant theoretical and medical constructs about the mind and body and applying them to the problem of addiction. In other words addiction becomes what a particular epistemology assumes it must be because of the essential precepts of that particular construct, e.g. psychoanalytic theory, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, existential psychotherapy, the medical model of biological disease and theories of social construction. This research starts from a different place (see methodology section below) in attempting to understand addiction and recovery from addiction by capturing and analysing something of the ‘sober world view’ of those in long term recovery without reference to what being an addict is ‘really’ about. Nonetheless the findings of this research and other projects like it will, and should be positioned within contemporary debate about addiction, the essence of which is explained below.

## 2.3      **Addiction as a disease**

The disease model of Alcoholism holds that alcoholism is a unitary disease entity, the causes of which are solely biological; rooted in heredity and physiology, with the definitive symptom being the inability to control consumption after the first drink and the condition being irreversible (Miller and Kurtz 1994). The disease concept, further refined to the 'dispositional' disease concept is well articulated in the literary realm (Milam and Ketcham 1983, Johnson 1973 and Jellinek 1960). This viewpoint does not see the alcoholic as being responsible for the development of their problems (Miller and Kurtz 1994) and therefore suggests that blaming them for their condition is "no different than criticising someone because they are poor or because they are bleeding from a stomach ulcer" (Weegmann and Cohen 2002 pXV). It is worth noting that it is now widely accepted that most drinkers do not become addicts, i.e. there is not something intrinsic in alcohol that causes alcoholism, which means that if addiction can be said to be a disease then it is person specific and one that some people get and others do not (Levine 1978).

It is however postulated that "addiction-as-disease did not emerge from the natural accumulation of scientific discoveries [and as such] was invented under historically and culturally specific conditions" (Reinarman 2005, p308), largely associated with the problematization of intoxication at the dawn of western modernity (see Burke 1978, cited in Reinarman 2005). As Valverde (1998) notes, the temperance movement in the US in the nineteenth century began to reconceptualize drunks as suffering from a 'disease of the will' (A term first coined by Benjamin Rush in 1774, cited in Miller and Kurtz 1994) rendering the individual powerless by crippling their self control. Since this time, addiction researchers along with institutions like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA), with its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), have sort to quantify and classify addiction as a disease. Reinarman (2005) is however cautious of the elasticity of

addiction-as-disease and claims that despite a long history of 'conceptual acrobatics' we still await a uniform set of symptoms and pathology that are necessarily to identify the presence of addiction as a solely medical phenomenon.

Whilst it may therefore be the case that the disease model of addiction is more of a social construction than a scientific reality "this should not be taken to mean that that the lived experience (the focus of this research), of what is called addiction is therefore less 'real', less powerful or less deserving of attention" (Reinarman 2005, p316). Many of its critics (Schaler 2000, Beasley 1998 and Alexander and Rollins 1984) have judged AA to be the key exponent of the model of addiction as a physical disease; however as Miller and Kurtz (1994) contend "it is in fact entirely out of character with AA to assert that alcoholism is caused only by physical abnormality...[hence], to do so is to deny the spiritual, psychological and social aspects of alcoholism and of humanity [that] AA consistently names" (p161). They suggest that it is more accurate to refer to the AA model as "spiritu-bio-psycho-social", (Miller and Kurtz 1994, p161), a term which takes account of the fact that "the main problem of the alcoholic centres in his mind rather than his body" AA 1976, p19) and that the solution will have to involve discussion of matters medical, psychiatric, social and religious" (AA 1976, p19). Valverde and White-Mair (1999) concur that AA incorporates elements of the disease model of alcoholism while remaining fundamentally a spiritual programme "thus mapping an important hybrid terrain often ignored by students of medicalisation" (p393).

## **2.4      Addiction as a choice**

The oldest model of drunkenness, which long predates Huss's (1849) coining of the term 'alcoholism' (Miller and Kurtz 1994) saw it as volitional and therefore the result of personal choice (Keller 1979, Sournia 1990). In rejecting the disease model Schaler (2000) sees humans as being capable of deliberate action in pursuit of chosen goals and maintains that

although much human behaviour is not carefully thought out, the acting person may at any moment pay more attention to such thoughtless behaviour and consciously modify it. He goes on, "all such voluntary human action is ultimately under conscious control, and is to be distinguished from an unconscious reflex or seizure, which is involuntary (Schaler 2000, p8). Schaler (2000) sets out the "Credo of the Free Will Model" (p9) as being; the best way to overcome addiction is to rely on your own willpower, addiction is about environment and a lack of ability to cope more than it is about alcohol or drugs themselves and people often outgrow addiction and can find their own ways through it without outside help. Similarly Cohen (2000) argues that the individual is essentially autonomous with a capacity for self regulation and that addiction-as a-disease is essentially a religious concept to manage fears about how firmly we are or want to be in control of our behaviours and destinies. In *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism* (1989) Fingarette claims that neither tolerance or withdrawal , the two most traditional and basic criteria for addiction, are actually manifest in many so-called alcoholics and advances the notion that instead heavy drinking is a chosen way of life however unhealthy and problematic.

In terms of punishment and/or treatment, Davies (1992) employs attribution theory and contends that to interpret habitual drug taking as being beyond the control of the user does not best fit the observable facts but instead serves as an excuse for bad behaviour and a means of absolving blame. Mills (1940, cited in Reinerman 2005) contends that giving accounts for actions is behaviour in its own right, independent of the action it purports to explain. Room (1991) attempts to evidence this point by observing that "we are living in a historic moment when the rate of alcohol dependence as a cognitive and existential experience is rising, although the rate of consumption of heaving drinking is falling" (p154). Heyman (2009) in turn suggests that the fact that many treatments teach, offer advice, arrange contingencies and convey techniques for improving social relations, fits neither a medical model nor a penal

model of rehabilitation but instead is simply the most logical treatment for a voluntary behaviour that is self destructive. Miller and Kurtz (1994) also acknowledge that the perspective that alcoholism is a matter of choice is very much alive and highlight the civil and criminal courts reluctance to hold defendants blameless for actions committed under the influence. They also identify the 'just say no' campaigns as being underpinned by the moral-volitional perspective and point to the increasing trend towards coercion and punishment as countermeasures to drunk driving (Miller and Kurtz 1994).

## **2.5 Therapeutic constructs of addiction**

Psychotherapeutic interventions in the area of substance abuse have traditionally been seen as a distinct alternative to AA. Although very different in themselves, the key therapeutic approaches to alcoholism are seen as being epistemologically separate from the teachings of AA and thus an either-or mentality has tended to dominate.

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), previously called Rational Therapy and Rational Emotive Therapy and originated by Albert Ellis in 1955, has been one of the most popular schools of psychotherapy for the treatment of alcoholism (Smith 1982, Sisemore and Williams 1984, cited in Ellis 1988, Dryden 2002). REBT is a cognitively and behaviourally oriented theory and practice emphasising active, directive, and systematic interventions in the here-and-now that rely upon the human being's innate capacity to change their thinking and thus overcome their biological, genetic and cultural environment in order to live more happy and productive lives (Ellis 2001). REBT maintains that all or nothing thinking is at the core of human disturbance and Ellis (1988) observes that this supposed characteristic of the alcoholic also permeates the field of substance abuse literature which he feels has promoted dichotomous and rigid thinking. Rather than seeing alcoholism or non alcoholism as being similar to pregnant or not pregnant (Ellis 1988), REBT supports the position that alcoholism is



best viewed as a continuum defined by the frequency, amplitude and duration of problems associated with alcohol and its misuse (Vaillant 1983, cited in Ellis1988). This approach to treatment is founded on the principle that alcoholism is essentially a behavioural disorder and REBT therapists therefore help clients to identify and challenge patterns of problematic behaviour around their drinking. In this regard, the individual is considered powerless only as long as their problem remains unacknowledged; personal power is restored when the problem is admitted and the task of behaviour change begins (Ellis 1994).

This emphasis on behaviour has lead REBT theorists and practitioners to suggest that controlled drinking strategies may be just as effective as total abstinence for some individuals who identify as having a 'drink problem'. Successfully moderating drinking behaviour by changing a person's relationship to drink is seen as possible because alcohol abuse leading to psychological and physical dependence is considered to be a learned behaviour as opposed to being in any way a medical or environmental given (See Nathan 1980, social learning theory as applied to alcoholism). Ellis (1988) does however qualify this suggested route by stating that it would only be appropriate with individuals who "a) are not highly physically dependant on alcohol, b) did not have a long history of alcohol related problems and c) are attitudinally flexible enough to work hard at reasserting some degree of control over their alcohol use" (p15). Along with Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) (Miller, Zweben, DiClemente and Rychtarik 1992), based on the principles of motivational interviewing, REBT has also been a major influence in the development of the SMART recovery programme; Self Management and Recovery Training (Steinberger 2004). This international programme is a secular and science based approach that assists individuals in achieving abstinence from alcoholic behaviours, is designed to evolve as scientific knowledge evolves (Steinberger 2004) and is positioned as an alternative to AA and other twelve step programmes.

In contra distinction to the view that addiction is essentially a cognitive and behavioural disorder, where it is helpful to look at belief systems, cognitive distortions and habits, the psychodynamic view of addiction considers the unconscious processes that may be at play in the alcoholic or drug addict as being of primary importance. In this respect alcoholism is seen as a symptom of underlying personality disorder caused by a disturbance in normal development (Miller and Kurtz 1994). The suggested treatment is psychodynamic psychotherapy, which, in the treatment of addiction tends to be grounded in the work of four psychoanalysts. Firstly, Bion's concept of the container and the contained allows therapists to explore how people with infantile feelings of emptiness or the distress of separation, often played out in the transference, resort to alcohol or drugs to contain feelings that are otherwise uncontainable (Weegmann and Cohen 2002). Secondly, Bowlby's attachment theory is seen as a pivotal area that therapists can use to locate symptoms in the interpersonal context, analyse how they play out in the treatment relationship and thus provide a basis for understanding how these precipitate and maintain a dependence on substances (Weegmann and Cohen 2002). Thirdly, Kohut's work, on self structures is drawn upon to show that when these structures are absent that the individual is then prone to addiction because they cannot achieve inner coherence, comfort themselves and are unable to self sooth or assure their own self care. (Weegmann and Cohen 2002). Lastly Winnicott's original formulation of the transitional object is seen as central to the psychodynamic view of addiction. In following Winnicott, Kernberg (1975) describes several object-related dynamics of addiction, namely that it may replace a parental imago in depression, an 'all good mother' in borderline personality or refuel a grandiose self in narcissism.

In terms of psychoanalytic focus, Rosenfeld (1960/1965) believed that the addict cannot be successfully treated without reaching back to an earlier phase of life during which there was a polarisation of what was felt to be good and what was felt to be bad. This splitting takes place

very early in life and well before the addict negotiates what Klein (1935) termed the depressive position. Rosenfeld (1960/1965) suggests that treatment can be extremely difficult as each step towards the reintegration of the ego of the addict is followed by an increase in acting out, which in turn risks a relapse into a more primitive state of mind. Despite these potential difficulties Johnson argues that in starting to recognise that some reliable human objects do in fact exist in the present, thus reworking their superego and ego ideal “some patients who have their underlying conflicts analysed may return to recreational use of alcohol” (1999, p300).

The existential psychotherapeutic view of addiction covers a broad spectrum of opinion some of which can be contradictory. To date there has been limited discussion about and research into addiction within the existential/phenomenological realm, and that which has taken place has been hampered by a tendency to oversimplify and constrain by staying stuck in the disease/choice debate and thus reverting to existential ‘theory’ to discount the possibility that an individual’s unique experience may not ‘feel’ like or ‘be’ like that which has been theoretically deduced (e.g. Haines 2007 and Wiklund 2008). Some of the extant literature has been characterised by setting ‘truths’ about AA against existential concepts of selfhood, struggle, anxiety, personal faith, courage and choice and points towards fundamental contradictions between the two traditions (e.g. Beasley 1998 and Schaler 2000). Beasley (1998) focuses on the limited modes of being that AA offers and maintains that what initially appears as an authentic confrontation of one’s own situation is actually interpreted deterministically by the twelve step model, with the result that both selves, the addict and the ex-addict, remain sedimented and objectified. Accordingly, Spinelli (1994) does not accept the abstinent AA member’s refusal to build upon times when they were able to control their drinking, something he calls consciously un-reflected dissociation; ignoring the evidence to the point that it is consciously disowned. Here again a psychotherapeutic model points towards a

return to more responsible and mindful drinking, when the individual has regained and demonstrated self control during a period of abstinence.

This view is by no means universal within the existential psychotherapeutic realm with theorists like Kurtz (1982) drawing upon the work of key existential philosophers to arrive at a very different existential formulation of addiction. He contends that active alcoholism brings the individual into contact with the existential meaning of dread and nothingness (see Kierkegaard 1844 and Heidegger 1927/1962) and that recovery relies on Sartre's (1943/1956) core existential insight that the ultimate human freedom is to say no, which in the case of alcoholism actually becomes the freedom to say never (Kurtz 1982). Kurtz (1982) claims that the first theme of all philosophies of existence posits that the human being is limited and that this realisation "marks the starting point of all existentialist thought" (p44). He goes on to link this idea with the fundamental teaching of AA, namely that the alcoholic condition is defined by essential limitation and fundamental finitude and that the alcoholic does not therefore have a limit where alcohol is concerned, he is in fact limited (Kurtz1982). This understanding of essential limitation illuminates the AA message that it is in fact the first drink that gets the alcoholic drunk and that anything but total abstinence will inevitably lead the individual back to excessive and compulsive drinking. These ideas originate from an earlier publication where Kurtz (1979) views alcoholism as a metaphor for the post-modern 'age of limits' in his exploration of the 'not-god' philosophy at the heart of AA that encourages each member to look at the personal reality of essential limitation. Szasz (1973) similarly identifies the primordial sin as the claim to be at the centre of the universe and thus 'as god', which AA terminology would see as 'denial' rooted in self centeredness and Sartre (1943/1956), would view as the 'mauvaise foi' of self deception.

In terms of the need for self transcendence Sartre (1943/1956) also declared that because one is essentially limited, to be conscious of another is to be conscious of 'what one is not'.

Heidegger (1927/1962) in turn understood the very meaning of 'ex-istence' as the ability to stand outside oneself and be beyond oneself. This resonates with Tillich's idea of the 'ground of being' (1952) where faith is re-defined as our relation to and belief in 'being itself'. Kurtz (1982) sees the suggestion of a Higher Power in AA as the means by which alcoholics are able to live out the mutuality of human dependence and personal independence. The work of van Deurzen in conceptualizing the spiritual dimension to our being-in-the-world would seem to epitomise the existential formulation of personal humanistic faith and point the ways towards an existential psychotherapeutic framework for working with the concept of self surrender as a key aspect of the healthy self. She describes this aspect as the "most controversial level of human experience" (2005) but one that allows us to make sense of our own world and maintain our own ideals without having to be religious in the traditional sense. Valverde and White-Mair (1999) in turn see the gaze of AA as being first and foremost an ethical one; "It observes and judges, but what is being observed is not the body of medicine or the mind of the psychiatric sciences, but rather one's own habits, desires, relations with others and overall spiritual progress" (p397). Kurtz (1982) summates by identifying a primary concern with human freedom as the key factor that unites AA as therapy and existentialism as philosophy (and latterly therapy), because according to both insights to be human is to be both free and unfree: whilst real freedom is limited, limited freedom is real.

## **2.6 Selfhood and addiction**

The relationship between a person's experience of addiction, their self concept and their sense of identity is central to the debate concerning the etiology of the phenomenon and a key factor in determining the efficacy of the various treatment constructs. Starting with Descarte's seminal observation 'I think therefore I am', there are many theories of the self in psychology, psychotherapy and philosophy that identify the human being as a distinct and independent

entity (Freud 1927, Foucault 1976, Nietzsche 1882/1974, Buber 1923, Lacan 1968, James 1890, Kohut 1977). Nevertheless Larkin and Griffiths (2002) maintain that “what is striking about the significance of the self concept, self esteem, identity and identification in the process of addiction and recovery, is that they are given limited attention by academic literature” (p307). Notwithstanding this, there has been some important work in conceptualising the alcoholic self, where issues of autonomy, omnipotence, compulsion, humility, self deception, personal responsibility, multiple selves, personal limitedness, self narrative and self surrender are all discussed. These include (Swora 2004, Thune 1977, Baugh 1988, McIntosh and McKeganey 2000 and 2001, Shinebourne and Smith 2009, Cain 1991, Koski-Jännes 2002 and Larkin and Griffiths 2002).

Thune (1977) regards insight into an individual’s life as only being possible through an appreciation of how they live in their personal world, central to which is their vision of what constitutes their own self which in turn profoundly influence their possibilities and limitations. In terms of alcoholism he goes on to suggest that the best treatment regime should therefore be directed at a “reconstitution and redefinition of the self and world” Thune 1977, p76) of the alcoholic. Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 1999 similarly affirm that the conditions of recovery from addictive behaviour are about finding one’s goals, attending to one’s needs and loving oneself, instead of constantly seeking love from others. Reconstructing a healthy sense of self is therefore about the alcoholic reaching an understanding of self both before and during addiction and linking this with an image of the self they aspire to be (McIntosh and McKeganey 2000). Koski-Jännes (2002) believes that this change in self concept needs to be profound so when ceasing to indulge in addictive behaviours this initial change in self concept extends into a more far reaching identity project. Cain (1991) and Swora (2004) also point to a change in identity as being the defining feature of AA and other twelve step recovery programmes. McIntosh and McKeganey (2001) in turn use the symbolic interactionist perspective to explain

how the self is constantly formed and reformed through interaction with others (e.g. an AA group) and highlight the important part of the process as being the individual's ability to interpret messages they receive from others and hence accept, reject or modify them. Denzin (1987, cited in Swora 2004), similarly identifies symbolic interactionist theory as directly challenging the biomedical model of alcoholism and sees the processes and practices of AA as promoting a restructuring of the alcoholic self. This idea of the self as something and no-thing is in line with Kierkegaard's concept of the self as being in a constant process of becoming, always evolving but yet at the same time always resolving because if "the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair" (1980, p30).

Shinebourne and Smith (2009) draw together the work of various authors (Markus and Nurius 1986, Hermans 1996, Higgins 1987, cited in Shinebourne and Smith 2009) to highlight the conceptualisation of the self as multiple, with different domains or 'possible selves' experienced as a system of affective-cognitive structures or schemas. These selves provide an interpretative and evaluative context for the current self and provide images of both desired and undesired end states (Shinebourne and Smith 2009). With regard to recovery from alcoholism, sustaining a unified sense of, first the non drinking and then sober self, is at the heart of AA's emphasis on personal spiritual revelation (Shinebourne and Smith 2009). This process begins with the individual coming to an understanding of a damaged self and, in achieving sobriety through following the twelve steps, eventually turns into "profound changes in the person's self concept, values and orientations in life" (Koski-Jännes 2002, p184). The evolution of this 'sober self' in AA terminology is achieved through being prepared to surrender the self, which at the point of drinking cessation is considered to be the toxic and compulsive self that is powerless over their ability to stop drinking. The paradoxical nature of self surrender and self empowerment has caused much misunderstanding about the nature of the sober self (Schaler 2000, Cohen 2000, Beasley 1998). McGinley (2011) however does not fall

into this trap and rejects the assumption of the natural sciences of the self as object and instead views the self as temporality and therefore only truly able to be understood historically. He suggests that in order to find ourselves it may be necessary to lose ourselves, that the self that is most human is able to give itself away and that "self liberation does not mean humanistic freedom, but liberation from our selves, liberation precisely from the desires and values that enchain us" (McGinley 2011, p9). These insights expressed under the title *The Question of the self in Existential Thought* are akin to the ideology of self transformation and self empowerment expressed in AA which begins by letting go or surrendering the current self object and embarking on a new experience of selfhood.

Baugh (1988) also picks up this point in claiming that in the reality of life one of the most important controls is to be able to give up control and that although it may sound like double talk to speak of strength through accepting powerlessness, these apparent contradictions are actually potential strategies for healing some of life's most discouraging experiences. Brenner (1985) also sees the possibility of winning by letting go, and makes the distinction between loss of control and surrender, seeing the former as being laced with frustration and the latter being about beginning afresh and thus finding "the joy of diving headlong into an experience" (p103). In terms of handing oneself over whilst attempting to stop drinking, Baugh (1988) views surrender to a 'Higher Power' in AA as threatening the alcoholics pride and thus surrendering necessitates giving up self centeredness and self glorification. Jabay (1969, cited in Baugh 1988) acknowledges that many people have unspoken ideas of omnipotence and therefore assume god like attributes and Baugh (1988) affirms that humility is necessary for true surrender and suggests that "this concept does not communicate a lower social or moral self. Humility includes knowing your own limitation, honest self-evaluation, accepting your weaknesses [and] feeling no better than and no less than any other human being (p 131). In terms of accepting limitations Mahoney (1979) sees AA as helping the alcoholic to control the



manageable and turn over the unmanageable to their own Higher Power, thus getting the individual away from will power, that at that point, has a probability of failure and thus achieving control by giving up control. Similarly Baugh (1988) holds that “a paradoxical control is to give up the desire and operations to gain control when one is powerless” (p137). For the successful AA member the result is a change in perspective and perception where they move from interpreting their situation as being about the prohibition, ‘I cannot drink’ to understanding its deeper reality as the joyous affirmation, ‘I can not-drink’ (Kurtz 1982). Kurtz therefore contends that “the alcoholic who joins the AA fellowship and embraces its programme does not thereby surrender his freedom to drink; rather, he gains the freedom to not-drink” (p53).

Other supporters of AA suggest that powerlessness in 12 step programs is actually a paradox that provides humility to people that seek recovery (Matheson and McCollum 2008, Herndon 2001) explains that paradox theory asserts that when one admits powerlessness over a substance he or she then gains power over his or her life and points to Buddhist thinking and teaching about power: “Yield and overcome” (p9). According to Bateson (1972b) AA provides a paradoxical metaphor in that “the experience of defeat not only serves to convince the alcoholic that change is necessary; it is the first step in that change” (p313). In the same way Swora (2004) views the alcoholic as gaining control over drinking, not by exercising self control, but by surrendering control to God or a Higher Power and thus gaining true independence. Baugh (1988) concludes by highlighting the importance that the Serenity Prayer in AA attaches to the alcoholic being able to recognize the difference between controllable and uncontrollable factors and explains that the techniques themselves are not the main point and that the principal concept is accepting reality when powerless to overcome some aspect of one’s condition. It is this ability that may in fact be the most important facet of a healthy sober self.

## 2.7 Existing research

Since the founding of AA in 1935, research into the nature of addiction; what constitutes recovery and how recovery can be achieved has had to contend with a powerful 'elephant in the room'. The spiritual and philosophical nature of the AA programme has fundamentally challenged the traditional medical/biological and psychiatric focus of enquiry. AA as an entity has also challenged quantitative researchers to come up with new tools to measure the impact of spiritual awakening on behaviour change and emotional well being and ultimately required them to consider that a more qualitative and subjective approach may ultimately yield more useful results when conducting research into 12 step recovery. Madsen (1988) has referred to AA as the major force dealing with alcoholism today whilst Alexander (2008) describes AA as the closest approximation to a success story in the field of addiction but also notes that attempts to document its success quantitatively have proved disappointing. Kurtz (1982) in turn points to the therapeutic success and hence social and intellectual significance of AA and suggests that despite AA's axiomatic injunction 'utilize don't analyse' that those trained in intellectual analysis have a responsibility to enquire into how and why it works for the benefit of society. Swora 2004 explains that evidence based medicine calls for measurable evidence of efficacy in determining best practice and that many in the treatment research field are frustrated by AA's emphasis on the less definable and quantifiable.

Despite the difficulties of measuring the 'effectiveness' or 'success' of AA, Project MATCH (1997), which was the largest treatment study ever conducted in the alcohol dependence field, evaluated AA against CBT and Motivational Enhancement Therapy. The researchers found that all three approaches had comparable outcomes at several follow-ups, although the 12-step programme was judged to be the most effective when the desired outcome was abstinence (Ouimette, Finney & Moos, 1997; Owen et al., 2003; Project MATCH Research Group, 1997). Continued affiliation to 12 step organisations was also found to be of primary

importance in Laudet, Savage and Mahmood's (2002) small scale study of individuals in long term recovery, who were asked via questionnaire to cite the factors that they felt were most important in maintaining their recovery status. Using structural equation modelling, Laudet, Morgen and White (2006) built on this preliminary investigation and examined stress and quality of life as a function of time in recovery. Their findings supported the hypothesis that social supports, spirituality, religiousness, life meaning, and 12-step affiliation all act as buffers against stress and thereby enhance life satisfaction.

Focusing more specifically on AA, Murray et al. (2003) carried out a quantitative study that explored the relationships among spirituality, control beliefs, and treatment outcomes by examining internal and God/Higher Power control beliefs in members of AA. The authors attribute the dearth of research in this specific area to the lack, until recently, of any form of empirical measure to assess the extent to which recovering individuals feel that their non drinking behaviour is influenced by God/Higher Power or their own internal sense of control. The research utilises two measurement tools; The Attribution to God's Influence Scale (AIGS; Baker, Sellman & Horn 2001) and the Alcohol-Related God Locus of Control Scale (AGLOC; Murray et al. 2003).

Some of the data analysis in this study was based upon Pargament et al.'s (1988) investigation into how God related control beliefs may interact with internal control perceptions to determine alcohol related behaviour. Three coping styles were proposed that characterize the individuals approach to problem solving and the long term maintenance of sobriety. These were the deferring style (active God, passive self), the self directing style (passive God, active self) and the collaborative style (active God, active self). The hypothesis was that individuals adopting the collaborative style, with strong internal and strong God/Higher Power beliefs would have significantly longer length sobriety and higher satisfaction with life. Despite this, the findings indicated that it was in fact those who endorsed control attributions consistent with

being self directed (high internal, low God/Higher Power) beliefs that showed significantly longer sobriety (7.73 years). These results seem to indicate that there is a broad spectrum of individual characteristics, and hence individuals, within AA; the most 'successful' of which retain personal control over their spirituality, their non-drinking and hence their sobriety. Nevertheless this research is ultimately limited by the lack of detail of whom, how and why and specifically by the absence of any analysis of how non drinking behaviour, based upon both internal and external influences, integrates into the wholeness of a persons being and vice versa.

Wallston et al. (1999) have similarly attempted to move beyond simply looking for the presence or absence of internality and externality in drinking behaviour and carried out quantative research into the God/Higher Power-related control subtype. This research was based on the God Health Locus of Control Scale (Wallston et al. 1999). The results showed a correlation between handing over control and spiritual growth on the one hand and drinking cessation and length of sobriety on the other. More generally the overall picture of the results of this type of research have confirmed that it is in fact the nuanced and individual balance of internal and God/Higher Power related control beliefs as lived by each individual that is the key to success both in terms of length of sobriety and, as Spalding and Metz (1997) found, quality of life. Murray et al.'s (2003) research confirms this point in acknowledging that those who are successful in AA have learned to incorporate both control sources into a sober existence. Moving beyond the idea that this balance is useful, which is now well established, and gaining a deeper appreciation of how this balance is conceptualised and played out in daily lives of individual AA members therefore becomes important.

Neale, Allen and Coombes (2005), appreciate this point in commenting that although research on addiction has traditionally been dominated by quantative methodologies that qualitative methods are very valuable in "demystifying drug and alcohol use and replacing stereotypes

and myths about addiction with more accurate information that reflects the daily reality of substance users lives” (p1586-1587). Larkin and Griffiths (2002) conducted research into the experience of recovery in a residential addiction treatment centre and are also clear that psychology needs to use qualitative methods and thereby address the subjective experience in accounting for addictive behaviour. In terms of the exact nature of research in the area of addiction Laudet and White (2008) maintain that “findings from most studies speak to recovery initiation only, not to the challenges and processes involved in achieving and sustaining long term recovery” (p28), notable exceptions being Laudet et al.’s (2002 and 2006) quantitative research mentioned above. From a qualitative perspective however, there is clearly a gap in the research and associated literature in the area of the dynamics of long term recovery and studies of this nature inevitably focus more on identity and selfhood and less on behaviour change. Larkin and Griffiths (2002) confirm that there is very little research which explicitly explores the link between self hood, identity and addiction and “none which makes a serious attempt to describe the relationship between identity and the addictive behaviours at a more general level” (p307).

There is however some qualitative research that has been carried out in this area including Koski-Jännes (2002), McIntosh and McKeganey (2000 & 2001), Shinebourne and Smith (2009 & 2010), Larkin and Griffiths (2002), Neale et al. (2005), Biernacki (1986, cited in McIntosh and McKeganey 2001) and Margolis, Kilpatrick and Mooney (2000, cited in Shinebourne and Smith 2010). Shinebourne and Smith’s (2010) research suggests that recovery in AA is about caring for self through anchoring the self in the AA community and thereby forming a new habit that allows the individual to monitor and sustain emotional and spiritual well being. Larkin and Griffith’s (2002) interpretation of their research data lead them to suggest that self and identity issues may well be crucial to our understanding of addiction and recovery, which in turn has important implications for the treatment of addictive behaviour, “not least because self and

identity issues are relatively 'accessible and addressable' in a therapeutic context" (p281). McIntosh and McKeganey (2000 & 2001) attempt to build upon Biernacki's (1986, cited in McIntosh and McKeganey 2001) more ethnographic account of recovery and point towards the need for addicts to repair a spoilt identity by constructing narratives of recovery that promote a non addict identity. Koski-Jännes's (2002) research findings lead her to argue that changes in identity are not limited only to the resocialisation or normalisation of former addicts, but they also involve attempts to find more personally satisfying and authentic modes of being in the world. Shinebourne and Smith (2009) in turn summate their research by reminding us of the importance of a sense of personal identity and a feeling of having an existence separate from others in recovery from alcoholism. For many alcoholics the vehicle for finding this new self is the AA fellowship and its offer of personal spiritual awakening through surrendering the stuck-self to find the free-self.

Whilst there is undoubted significance and guidance to be found in the relevant literature and some current research in this area there is also a clear need for some new research and commentary that focuses specifically on long term recovery, transcends the theoretical components or empirical measurements of freedom, spirituality and self-hood and gives primacy to the sober AA member's right to self define, based on their felt sense of daily living. This research will seek to provide this opportunity by foregrounding the participant's voice, wherever it may fall in the theoretical, psychological or literary realms. The research methodology or 'engine room' of this project therefore needs to lend itself to this endeavour and create space for each participant's experience of self surrender and self empowerment in long term sobriety to emerge, in all its otherness, as the central means of potentially creating new knowledge.

## **Chapter 3      Methodology**

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It is generally accepted that the choice of research methodology, the 'how', has a direct connection to the research findings, the 'what', in almost equal measure to the characteristics of the phenomenon which are the subject of investigation (e.g. Willig 2001 and 2007, Langdridge 2007, Van Manen 1990 and Wertz 2005). This is particularly relevant to the qualitative research paradigm and in fact if properly negotiated is at the heart of why results of qualitative studies have the potential to both compliment and go beyond data produced using quantitative methodologies. The strategies we therefore adopt as researchers need to have what could be termed a double congruence; firstly the choice of research method needs to compliment how we identify and locate ourselves in the world of others, with particular emphasis on how we view the construction of 'reality' and 'truth' in the research encounter, and secondly the research design should also be judged, by the researcher, to be the most appropriate methodology to help to shed light on the general and specific area of investigation, in this case recovery from addiction through AA and the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment in 12 step programmes.

Acquiring certain types of knowledge is at the heart of the research endeavour, hence understanding epistemology (the philosophy of the nature and possibility of knowledge) and how a certain epistemological position has inspired a particular methodological framework can empower the researcher in their search for the most appropriate methodology and also allow them to access its full potential, which paradoxically can sometimes be about accepting its essential limitations. This requires us as researchers to first contemplate and then locate and articulate where we individually stand in relation to the psychological, philosophical and social scientific debates about our nature, our being and our being with others and then reflexively

monitor how we become informed by and changed within these three spheres of understanding as a result of engaging in a particular research project with specific participants.

Accordingly, I will first explore the scope of the epistemological discussion in the area of social research, situating myself within the debate, and then move on to establish the theoretical underpinnings of my chosen research method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), explaining its framework and detailing how I have adhered to it in this research. I will also consider what other methodologies may have been appropriate for my research topic, explore my reflexive engagement with the research question, assess validity, take account of ethical considerations and describe the research procedure.

### **3.1 Epistemology**

In the context of the social sciences the terms quantitative and qualitative are associated not only with the particular methods and procedures but also with particular epistemologies or theories of knowledge (Martin and Stenner 2004). Both Reicher (2000) and Madill, Jordan and Shirley (2000) agree that the differences between the various approaches and their epistemological underpinnings are significant as they have different philosophical roots and theoretical assumptions which in turn generate different types of questions. Madill et al. (2000) also remind us that “qualitative researchers have a responsibility to make their epistemological position clear, conduct their research in a manner that is consistent with that position and present their findings in a way that allows them to be evaluated appropriately” (p17). Thinking about what we can know and how we can come to know it therefore involves the researcher in resonating with a particular paradigm or set of basic beliefs that provide the basic principles for understanding the world (Langdridge 2007).

Martin and Stenner (2004) identify quantitative research as being overwhelmingly in keeping with the realist tradition in contrast with qualitative research and the epistemology of



positivism. A positivist paradigm is one in which there is belief in a real world that we can gain knowledge through the use of scientific methods including quantification and the use of statistics (Langdridge 2007). Positivism has been modified in recent years into post positivism which accepts the need to employ scepticism as to the exact truth of any findings, particularly in the field of social sciences. Notwithstanding this, Gergen, (1985, p273) rather scathingly but with some justification, identifies much of the resulting quantitative methodology, in its search for fact, as remaining enchanted by the myth that, “empirical methodology were some form of meat grinder from which truth could be turned out like so many sausages”.

Qualitative research is also broken down into various epistemologies. Madill et al. (2000) group them under three headings; realist, contextual constructionist and radical constructionist. Willig (2001) sees these categories as existing on a continuum with naïve realism on one end and radical relativism on the other. She outlines Madill et al.'s (2000) three classifications; firstly the realist platform involves an orientation towards discovery which can take more or less naïve forms but is always aware of the subjective nature of knowledge production (Willig 2001), and secondly the contextual constructionist position that sees all knowledge as being contingent on the context and standpoint of the individual and as such accepts a relativist ontology where, from the individual's perspective, there is much that is 'true' and very little that is 'false' (Willig 2001). Thirdly the radical constructionist perspective where knowledge is seen as a social construction and discursive resources are used to challenge what constitutes knowledge (Willig 2001). Reicher (2000) covers roughly the same ground and contrasts qualitative research that aims to gain a better understanding of people's experiences (experiential) with studies that are concerned with the role of language in the construction of reality (discursive).

In terms of what can constitute meaningful knowledge my view is akin to the contextual constructionist perspective. This involves subsuming my desire for clarity and objectivity and

instead “embracing conflict ambiguity and paradox as pervasive and necessary ingredients in psychological work” (Soth 2007). I regard aspects of our being that are termed fact, truth and reality as being experienced differently by each of us specifically because each of us are different. Seminal existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard (1846/1992) and Nietzsche (1882/1974) understood this point with the former seeing the search for one truth as subduing creativity and passion and the latter seeing a mechanical view of the world as being essentially meaningless.

Thus research that seeks to create knowledge about human kind needs to be aware that it is not possible or desirable to pull the participant out of the free flowing river, dry them off and see who they ‘really are’ with the aim of finding the truth or confirming a pre-existing suspicion of what swimming ‘really is’. Instead it is necessary to jump in and swim alongside the other to glimpse something of who they are before retreating to the rivers edge, further down the river, and reflecting on the journey that both have taken. I would therefore agree with Willig (2001) that a contextual constructionist position would need to show the relationship between accounts and the contexts in which they were produced (e.g. situational, personal, cultural and social) for both the participant and researcher. As such an important criterion for evaluation within this context is reflexivity (Willig 2001) which I will go on to discuss below.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest that the epistemological position of a research question is also important and should be the prime reason for choosing a particular research method. My aim in this research is to build up a rich picture of the subjective–felt experience (Shinebourne and Smith 2009) of the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment in long term recovery from alcohol addiction through AA and shed light on what sobriety means to each participant that I interview. The focus is therefore about wondering not confirming, experiencing not reducing and being with not observing. Langdridge (2007) views the phenomenological paradigm as being involved with capturing experience by collecting

naturalistic first person accounts rather than uncovering the real knowable world. From a research perspective hermeneutics points to the possibility of co-understandings and norms of being emerging from qualitative studies and I will now go on to say more about these concepts and how their complementarity as expressed in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides the best methodological framework to carry out this research.

### **3.2 Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which human beings gain knowledge of the world around them and more specifically with a desire to return to the things themselves, as they appear to us as perceivers within particular contexts and at particular times (Willig 2001). As Wertz (2005) puts it, “Phenomenology is a low-hovering, in-dwelling, meditative philosophy that glories in the concreteness of the person-world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy and ambiguity, primacy over the known” (p175). Husserl (1913/1983, cited in Finlay 2008, and 1936/1970) was the founder of the phenomenological method and his conception was that in order to be able to examine everyday experience, it is necessary to step back from the ‘natural attitude’, i.e. being unreflectively immersed in the taken for granted world and hence, engender a ‘phenomenological attitude’ which involves methodological steps in a process of ‘phenomenological reduction’ (Shinebourne 2011). Engaging this attitude involves a preparedness to be open to whatever may emerge by suspending prejudgements, bracketing assumptions (epoché), deconstructing claims and restoring openness (Van Manen 2011) and thus embracing the Husserlian paradox; that going beyond the natural attitude(in ourselves) actually allows us to discover it (in others).

For Husserl, the reduction delivers the philosopher (or researcher) to the “groping entrance into this unknown realm of subjective phenomenon” (1936/1970, p161) and involves four key elements: Firstly, the epoché of the natural sciences (Husserl 1936/1970), which brackets

scientific theory and knowledge in an attempt to return to the lifeworld as it is experienced as opposed to scientifically preconceived. Secondly, the epoché of the natural attitude (Husserl 1936/1970), which involves experiencing the phenomenon as 'presence' without attributing existence to it and thus allowing for a 'phenomenological psychological reduction'. Husserl urges us to achieve this reduction by putting "out of action the general positing [and] parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being" (1913/1983, p60, cited in Finlay 2008) before returning to it with an "experiencing gaze" (1936/1970, p153). Although less relevant to psychological research (Finlay 2008), Husserl (1936/1970) thirdly proposes a 'transcendental reduction' which involves standing aside from one's subjective experience and ego in order to be able to focus on transcendental consciousness. Finally the 'eidetic reduction' or 'intuition of essences' (Husserl 1936/1970) is posited where the invariant characteristics of the phenomenon are described by employing a process of 'free imaginative variation' where aspects of the phenomenon are freely changed in order to discern its essential characteristics. These reductions are underpinned by Husserl's belief that intentionality is the key feature of our consciousness that allows us to turn out into the world and be aware that in doing so we are always conscious of some-thing. Consequently it is the public realm of experience that is the object of phenomenological study i.e. the relationship between a person's consciousness and the world or, more specifically what is experienced; the noema and how it is experienced; the noesis (Langdridge 2007).

It is important to note that Husserl was generating these ideas as a means of focussing on his own process of awareness whereas from a research perspective there is a different, but equally congruent, focus on other people's everyday experiences and their second- order mental and affective responses to that activity where the meaning that is bestowed by the participant on experience, as it becomes experience, can be said to represent the experience itself (Smith et al. 2009). This point is particularly relevant to my research with its focus on

participant's dynamic assessments of their 'sober lives' where, from a temporal point of view, the story of the self is the self, is the story of the self, i.e. the self is both encapsulated and transformed by self reflection. Accordingly, Thune (1977) regards phenomenology as having demonstrated that world and the self are constantly being recreated as an individual proceeds through life and as such regards a full understanding of alcoholism as requiring a "phenomenological or rigorously subjective investigation of the meaning of alcoholism, the self and the alcoholics world" (p76). Phenomenology as conceived by Husserl therefore offers us, as researchers, the opportunity to re-interpret the term reality to mean what is thought about things (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006) and having 'groped' towards an understanding of the lived experience of the other to be prepared to accept it as both meaningful and real. This research therefore aims to capture the particular experiences of particular people rather than the essence of any one experience (Smith et al. 2009) and as such is grounded in the hermeneutic, existential branch of phenomenology.

### **3.3 Hermeneutic phenomenology**

Although a student of Husserl's, Heidegger's approach to phenomenology marked a significant move away from the transcendental project and its search for essence and marked the beginning of a hermeneutic and existential emphasis in phenomenological philosophy (Heidegger 1927/1962). This philosophical movement was existential in as much as the 'I' remained embedded in the intentional relationship between the noema and noesis (Langdrige 2007) and hermeneutic in that the situated and interpreted quality of our knowledge about the world (Smith et al. 2009) was placed at the centre of the phenomenological method. Along with other existential philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Heidegger considered the person to be embedded in the world, in a particular historical, social and cultural context (Shinebourne 2011). This means that "self and world are

inseparable components of meaning” (Moustakas 1994, p28) (in Willig p51). Merleau-Ponty similarly rejected the idea of being able to achieve a ‘God’s eye view’ and believed that the “most important lesson that reduction teaches us is the impossibility of complete reduction” (1945/1962, p xiii). This is something that Giorgi (1985) clearly understands when he states that nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Similarly, Spinelli (1989) affirms that Phenomenological Psychology is more concerned with human difference than with the identification of essences.

Meanwhile Sartre’s famous quote “existence comes before essence” (1948, p26) indicates that we are always becoming ourselves and that the self is not a pre-existing entity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled (Smith et al. 2009). Thus Heidegger (1927/1962) claimed that “the phenomenology of Dasein [being there], is hermeneutic in the primordial signification of the word, where it designates the business of interpreting” (p62). Moran (2000) contends that “Phenomenology is therefore seeking after a meaning that is perhaps hidden by the entity’s mode of appearing and suggests that “in that case the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text” (p229).

For the interpreter, Heidegger (1927/1962) affirms that every interpretation will be grounded in “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception” (p191), and therefore warns against these conceptions being presented to us by “fancies and popular conceptions” (p195) and directs us to “make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves” (ibid). How we treat our non transcendent emersion in the world or our ‘fore-selves’ is therefore fundamental to the efficacy and sustainability of phenomenological research. Finlay (2008) suggests that the challenge for the researcher is to critically and reflexively evaluate how these pre-understandings influence the research and to devise ways of containing their “seductive power” (p17). Whilst Gadamer (1975/2004) views prejudices as “not necessarily unjustified and erroneous” (quoted in Moran 2000, p278), he does address

the universality of the hermeneutic problem by urging the researcher to be aware of their biases “so that the text can present itself in all its otherness” (1975, p269). Similarly, Colaizzi (1973) understands that the researcher brings to awareness their own presuppositions whilst formulating the research problem, before later bracketing them out from the analysis of the participants’ description. In spite of our fore-knowing, Van Manen (2011) urges us to retain a sense of ‘wonder’ which should animate our questioning of the other’s experience, which Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) seek to achieve by “bridling” as opposed to bracketing experience to guard against understanding too quickly and thereby “make definite what is indefinite” (p130).

In terms of research methodology, the hermeneutic turn in the phenomenological tradition requires the researcher to appreciate that what is real is not dependant on us but the exact meaning and nature of reality is (Dreyfus 1995). Being ‘alone’ with a participant’s transcript therefore challenges the researcher to continually check the validity of interpretations. This is achieved by entering the hermeneutic circle when looking at data, which calls for a “more enlivened from of bracketing” (Smith et al. 2009, p25) and is a process that is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole of a text where to understand any given part, you look at the whole and to understand the whole you look to the parts (Smith et al. 2009). The idea is that our entry into the meaning of a text can be made at a number of different levels, all of which relate to each other and many will offer different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of the text (Smith et al. 2009). This is an iterative stance and focuses on coherence, sensitivity and making justifiable claims about a text that go beyond that text but always emanate from the text itself. There is a synergy here with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Van Manen (1990), who talks of the need to search for themes through different methods of engaging with research data that result in a good balance between part and whole and allows us to find the ‘universal’ in the ‘particular’, without arriving at

idiosyncratic interpretations that move beyond the data. This endeavour is at the heart of IPA which is the chosen methodology for this study, and also dovetails with my personal understanding, as a researcher, of what I can come to know (about the paradox of surrender and self empowerment) and how I can come to know it.

### **3.4 Interpretative Phenomenological analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a method of thematic analysis examining the personal experience of the participant and how they make sense of that experience. First articulated by Jonathan Smith (1996), IPA recognises that access to experience is both partial and complex (Smith 1996) and aims to explore a person's current subjective mode of engagement with some specific context or aspect of the world (Larkin, Watts and Clifton 2006). As a psychological research method IPA seeks to capture the qualitative and experiential dimension (Smith 1996), is congruent with the existential phenomenological paradigm and at the same time can link existential-phenomenological research with the wider research literature in psychology (Shinebourne 2011). The approach is phenomenological in that it involves a detailed description of the participant's lifeworld and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the event or object itself (Smith and Osborn 2003). Instead IPA uses the participant's account in an 'inverse fashion' to reflect upon long term sobriety in this case, from the perspective of a participant's engagement with it (Larkin et al. 2006).

Accessing the participant's engagement with the phenomena in a way that opens up, sheds light and gains an 'insider's perspective' requires the researcher to go beyond empathic identification towards an understanding that focuses on making sense of the participant's account (Smith and Osborn 2003). Smith and Osborn (2003) go on to suggest that this access therefore depends on, and is complicated by, the researchers own conceptions that are in fact



also needed in order to make sense of the other's personal world through a process of interpretative activity. Smith (2004) makes reference to "double hermeneutics [where]: The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world" (p40). Thus, IPA draws on the hermeneutic and interpretative as well as the phenomenological traditions in qualitative research and the work of Ricoeur (1970) and Gadamer (1975/2004) is particularly relevant in terms of this epistemological underpinning. Ricoeur (1970) suggests that we can never have a 'view from nowhere' and that whilst we must guard against our own projection onto the data collected it is also not possible to 'speak from nowhere'. He makes a clear distinction between the 'hermeneutics of meaning recollection' and the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricoeur 1970). Smith (2004) maintains that both modes of hermeneutic engagement are necessary to contribute to a complete understanding of the participant's lived experience. As such, IPA offers the researcher the opportunity to go beyond 'what is said' and consider 'what is meant' and thereby accept the dual challenge of asking critical questions of the text, "which participants may be unwilling or unable to do themselves" (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p189), whilst at the same time allowing the text to ask searching questions of themselves as researchers.

Gadamer (1975/2004) builds on this point and grounds his ideas in Heidegger's hermeneutics and the relation between fore-structure and the phenomenon at hand. Rather than putting one's preconceptions up front, Smith concurs with the view that "one may only really get to know what preconceptions are once the interpretation is underway" (Smith et al. 2009, p26). Accordingly, embracing the dynamic tension that always exist between the interpreter and the text is not something to be resolved but rather embraced and harnessed if the interpretation is going to be authentic and meaningful. Gadamer (1975/2004) suggests that what could be called 'our embedded otherness' or as he terms it prejudice, constitutes our personal horizon

(of experience): “The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p269) This horizon can also be understood as the individual floating in their own historicity yet orientated towards the frontier of them-selves as they encounter the other. Hence the horizon is constantly evolving through a process of fusion with other horizons (Shinebourne 2011), which requires the researcher to be alert and skilful in holding their fore-selves in check by judicious use of epoché, reflexive engagement with the text and entry and re-entry into the hermeneutic circle.

Conducting research in this manner does not prevent the researcher from ‘being there’ as an individual with their own life world, but ensures that they are always orientated to the phenomenon at hand. As Smith (2010) reminds us, no two researchers can replicate the same interview transcript with the same participant, but this does not mean that the process has been unsuccessful or methodologically lax. I would suggest that the role of the researcher in IPA is analogous to that of the curator of an art exhibition. Here the curator (researcher) seeks to ‘display’ the artists’ work (participant’s lifeworld) in a way that make sense of its constituent parts and allows the work to speak for itself but also articulates overriding themes whenever they present themselves. Additionally the curator (researcher) assumes responsibility for increasing access to the work for visitors to the exhibition (the research audience) in full awareness that the way in which the art is hung (transcripts are dealt with) has the potential to add a new layer of meaning that can give greater contextual insight into the subject as well as reveal something of the curator’s (researcher’s) own position.

This study into the experience of self surrender and self empowerment in twelve step recovery from addiction using IPA is a joint project between the participants and myself because this is all that it could ever be. What is discerned is a co-creation and IPA provides a clear theoretical and methodological framework in which to explore an aspect of time bounded experience with a small group of others.

Along with phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is also informed by the idiographic tradition in qualitative research, with its concern for the particular and a commitment to use small groups of purposively-selected people (Smith et al. 2009) to uncover their key objects of concern and analyse their experiential claims (Larkin et al. 2006) they make about a particular aspect of their lifeworld. Shinebourne (2011) explains that the “analytic process begins with the detailed analysis of each case, moving to careful examination of similarities and differences across cases to produce detailed accounts of patterns of meaning and reflections on shared experience” (p23). Thus idiography does not eschew generalizations, but rather prescribes a different way of establishing those generalizations (Harré 1979, cited in Smith et al. 2009). In elucidating this point further, Smith et al. (2009) point to the fact that whilst experience is uniquely embodied and perspectival, and therefore amenable to an idiographic approach, it is also a “worldly and relational phenomenon, which offers us a concept of the person which is not quite so discrete and contained as the typical understanding of the individual” (p29). Hence, rather than the individual per se, it is the ‘in-relation-to’ (Smith et al. 2009) aspect of the phenomenon, as the participant reaches out to it, and experiences it as part of them-selves that I am concerned with in this study. Furthermore, from this idiographic base and through “connecting the findings to extant psychological literature..., nomothetic research” (Smith et al. 2009, p38) and other IPA studies in the area of recovery from addiction (see below), this study seeks to contribute to what could be termed a critical mass of data having the potential to shed further light on what is there as opposed to what is assumed to be there in the lives of long term sober members of AA.

### **3.5 Using IPA to study Addiction**

Although research on addiction has traditionally been carried out using quantitative methodologies (Neale et al. 2005, cited in Shinebourne and Smith 2009 and Pargament et al.

1988), there is a growing corpus of qualitative research in the area of alcohol and drug dependency (e.g. Moore 2001 and Nichter et al. 2004, cited in Shinebourne and Smith 2009). Thune (1977) identifies the importance of such research and suggests that, “a full understanding of alcoholism requires complementing the usual positivist approach to the problem with a ‘phenomenological’ or rigorously ‘subjective’ investigation of alcoholism, of the self [and] of the alcoholic’s world” (p75-76). This is about allowing the person who is ‘experiencing’ to provide the meaning without prior interpretation, classification or assumption as to what an alcoholic ‘is’ which in turn transfers the role of expert from the enquirer to the teller. Larkin and Griffiths (2002) similarly contend that any understanding of the relationship between addiction, self and identity should be “informed by the participants’ own accounts” (p281), which I would suggest becomes even more pertinent in studies like this, where participants are long term sober and their accounts are therefore less tempered by the turmoil that often accompanies early recovery. This research is less concerned with how the cessation of drinking alcohol has been achieved (techniques) and more concerned with how “the initial change in self concept, is...followed by other, more far reaching identity projects that help to make the resolved state more meaningful and rewarding for the individual” (Koski-Jännes 2002, p184).

In terms of IPA specifically, there have been a number of studies on addiction and recovery that have used this research method (e.g. Chappell, Eatough, Davies and Griffiths, 2006, De Visser and Smith 2007; Cited in Shinebourne and Smith 2010, Larkin and Griffiths 2002, Shinebourne and Smith 2009 and Shinebourne and Smith 2010). These studies are founded on a belief that “IPA methodology can make a valuable contribution to psychological understanding of the experience of addiction” and provide a “subjective perspective not often addressed in psychological accounts of addictive behaviour” (Shinebourne and Smith 2009, p153 and p152). This research continues in the same vein and uses rich and in depth

participant accounts to expand on the concepts of self surrender and self empowerment, that underpin long term sobriety, and recasts recovery as a way of being-in-the-world as opposed to a restoration of one's health. Recovering in this context is about recovering the self continually as life challenges the self constantly, where the first and most important recovery (of the self) in these participants' lives has been to able to overcome their uncontrollable desire to drink. Furthermore, the interpretative dimension of this qualitative methodology allows for an understanding of how some of the emergent themes concerning being and self hood are "relatively accessible and addressable in a therapeutic [and especially existential therapeutic] context" (Larkin and Griffiths 2002, p281).

Interpreting the experience of another is therefore at the heart of both the challenge and possibility that IPA offers the researcher. With regard to studies on twelve step recovery this challenge and possibility is sharpened yet further by the need to take into account that the sharing of one's experience with another (AA member) is in fact regarded as one of the central means of personal transformation in the program. Indeed, Jensen (2000) describes Alcoholics Anonymous as the "story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism" (p42). It is therefore necessary for the researcher to locate themselves within the debate concerning the efficacy and utility of such accounts when used as primary research data. Whilst it is true that participants are inevitably constructing their past from their present, the question becomes, does this represent a de facto limitation or disadvantage or is this a 'real time' snap shot of the individual's embedded and utterly subjective experience of 'then and now (as expressed in the transcript) actually the most potent means of creating more knowledge about addiction?

In this study, and others like it, where participants are in long term recovery, by necessity, data collection involves the use of long term autobiographical memory and raises the issue of how autobiographical memory mediates experience (Jenson 2000). Keane (2001) addresses this

point and suggests that what is presented as the addict's "true life" story is actually constituted through a "doubling effect that occurs when the self becomes both object and subject of discourse"(p569). Bakhtin (1990) identifies this doubling as the author of the text writing about themselves as the hero in the text, which at first glance points to the potential for the author to manufacture their hero-themselves for public consumption, thus losing the authenticity of any experiential claims. Jensen (2000) however correctly reminds us that this relationship is a complex dynamic and Bakhtin (1990) regards the most important distinction as being whether or not the hero (or participant talking about their experience) is unconsummated (still working through the unfolding events of a life in progress) or consummated (where their life is already fated and written).

In terms of AA stories it is very clear that members accounts of themselves are not "printed autobiographies" (Jensen 2000, p73) and whilst they involve the teller explaining where they used to be and where they are now they most poignantly look to the challenges ahead with an emphasis on personal effort and not taking life for granted. The vibrancy of continuing and constant challenge has certainly come across in the data analysis of this group of AA members, further discussed below, where far from being resolved, their accounts are essentially "unfinished tales about learning to live with uncertainty" (Jensen 2000, p73) and as such contain a tension and a present day-ness which substantially closes the gap between then and now and author and subject. Thus, as Keane (2001) contends, addiction autobiographies "have much to offer as sophisticated productions of identity" where "the subjective experiences presented in life writing give addiction a depth and a quotidian reality not found in clinical descriptions or therapeutic texts" (p570). Using IPA presents the best methodological vehicle to capture and write about these experiences as it accepts the co constituted nature of the findings and the need for the researcher to further amplify aspects of the participant's experience through identifying both emergent and dominant themes, both

within and across the texts as the basis for saying more and going further in the search for immanent meaning.

### **3.6 Limitations and Critiques**

In terms of limitations of IPA, there is a view expressed by Willig (2001) that it relies too heavily upon the representational validity of language as the tool with which participants can capture their experience, and in its conceptualisation of language it does not pay enough attention to its constitutive role and may therefore tell us more about how a participant talks about a particular experience in a particular context than the experience itself. She also makes the observation that IPA relies upon participants' descriptions of experiences as constituting suitable material for phenomenological analysis and suggests that the applicability of the method may be limited by the level of sophistication required by the participant in articulating their thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Langdridge (2007) and Willig (2001) also question the interpretative bias of IPA suggesting that too heavy a reliance on perception and cognition can limit our understanding of the phenomenon itself.

The key distinction in terms of language is whether or not, as a means of disclosing experience, language controls or empowers us. Language as control follows the ideas of Derrida (1972/2010) and language as empowerment would be closer Gadamer's position (1975/2004). Whilst IPA does not explicitly seek to answer this question it does in fact allow for and encourage commentary on the use of language as part of the analysis and discussion stages of the research. Notwithstanding this, it is true that IPA requires the researcher to focus on experience as expressed through language as opposed to language used to describe experience, a position that is based on the understanding that an over focus on the use of language is achieved at the cost of an in depth account of the experience. In terms of this research, it has been important to embrace language as the gateway to the other's

experience whilst at the same time being prepared to focus on it specifically where it may reveal something that is hidden and hence unexpressed in the participant's account. In terms of the sophistication of the participant in articulating their thoughts, research participants in this study are very well positioned because, as detailed above, communicating their experience to others has been a central part of the experience itself it is precisely the individual's perception or cognition of the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment that is of primary importance and to a large extent is actually the phenomenon itself.

With regard to the interpretative element of IPA it is certainly true that there is always a danger when interpreting an experience that the interpreter can become too partial or over invested in a particular standpoint and as such the interpretative element of IPA requires the most skill and methodological rigour. Nonetheless it is also important to remember that the essence of the phenomena is not the focus of the interpretation, it is the phenomenon as it appears to the participant and is understood by the researcher that guides the interpretation. This is based on a belief that in the totally imperfect world of studying others, this approach allows for the most epistemologically congruent and therefore potentially enlightening way of knowing more about things by spotlighting how another individual describes and makes sense of their experience.

Giorgi (2010) has recently suggested that the interpretative element of IPA can lead to a laxness in methodology and may also be more about "prescriptive intentions" than simply offering "suggestions" (p7). He also suggests that IPA is scientifically weak and points to the inability of the method to allow for the replication of results with a different researcher interviewing and analysing the data of the same participant (Giorgi 2010). What Giorgi may not be appreciating is that the tentative suggestions that are made about phenomenon through the identification of themes and writing a discussion are only meaningful, enlightening or useful when read and considered by the research audience. Hence IPA accepts the essential difference between qualitative and quantitative research, in that the skill of the researcher is key



in qualitative work and that simply following method is no guarantee of good work (Smith 2010), just as being able to produce the same results twice is not the overriding measure of the validity of results. IPA encourages the researcher to be bold and take measured risks in understanding more about the other's experience, which in turn can inspire thoughts and spark connections in others who read the work and build knowledge in a less empirical and more descriptive manner. Most importantly therefore, IPA studies such as this one need to be judged on their own terms to ascertain their value and IPA researchers need to appreciate that the tension between efficacy and creativity needs to be striven for throughout the research process.

### **3.7 Alternate methods**

Unlike quantitative analysis where choosing “the tool for the job” may be appropriate the choice of research method in qualitative studies needs to be lead by an appreciation of “what the job is” (Smith et al. 2009). Willig similarly affirms that methods are a means to an end and cites the importance of the research question informing our choice of method and not the other way around (2001). Whilst the delineations between different qualitative methodologies is by no means absolute, especially where epistemology is concerned, Smith et al. (2009) identify four distinctive methods within which there are several versions. These methods are phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis (Smith et al. 2009).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has already been discussed in this section and was considered more appropriate for this research question than descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008) for two main reasons. Firstly, the search for ‘essential structure’ and ‘invariant meaning’ (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008) in identifying the givens of a particular experience presupposes, incorrectly, that the researcher is able to remove themselves from the research

by employing scientific methods of reduction. Secondly, it is my belief that experience is always interpreted first by the teller and then the listener in qualitative research as opposed to being simply described, thus the search for order both within and between experiences is essentially arbitrary and in fact tells us more about the co creation of data as opposed to the essence of the phenomenon being investigated.

Grounded theory was designed to give a systematic and sequential approach to qualitative field work and analysis (e.g. see Glaser and Strauss 1967) and offers a highly structured procedure for the development of theory (Smith et al. 2009). The constant revision and data comparison that is required has some resonance with the requirement in IPA for researchers to continually re-enter the hermeneutic circle during data analysis. There is a clear overlap between IPA and grounded theory, especially the constructivist version articulated by Charmaz (2006) which offers a greater flexibility of process and clearer epistemological position (Smith et al 2009). However, studies using this approach are aimed at producing mid-level theoretical accounts with relatively large numbers of research participants whereas IPA studies are concerned with the micro analysis of individual experience “with the texture and nuance arising from the detailed exploration and presentation of actual slices of human life” (Smith et al. 2009). In critiquing grounded theory, Thomas and James (2006) have questioned whether what is produced is actually a theory and also challenged the notion of 'ground' itself, i.e. why is an idea of 'grounding' one's findings important in qualitative inquiry and what are they 'grounded' in? These authors also suggest that it is impossible to free oneself of preconceptions in the collection and analysis of data in the way that Glaser and Strauss (1967) say is necessary (Thomas and James 2006), which is a view that is much closer to my own epistemological position. They also point to the formulaic nature of grounded theory and the lack of congruence of this with open and creative interpretation, which ought to be the hallmark of qualitative inquiry (Thomas and James 2006).

Discourse theory sees all phenomena as social constructions and discourse analysis uses language as the object of investigation. The point of distinction between various methods is the focus on either power or construction (Smith et al. 2009). Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g. Parker 1992 in Smith 2009) is concerned with power relations in society and seeks to understand discourse in relation to large bodies of knowledge, mainly historical, cultural and political. This approach challenges the assumption that “language is a transparent medium in which the speaker simply seeks to communicate (internal psychological) content” (Langdrige 2007, p160) and instead focuses on the function of language in the constitution of social and psychological life (Willig, in Smith 2008). The other major branch of discourse analysis is termed discursive psychology where discourse is understood to refer to communicative interaction and the use of available cultural resources is analysed in terms of their ability to reach interactive ends (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

The aim of this research is to engage intensively in the experience of self surrender and self empowerment in twelve step recovery in preference to focusing on deconstructing that experience, using discourse analysis, for three main reasons. Firstly, despite the fact that some language cues and cultural ideas can be part of an IPA study, it was important that this research did not ‘fall between two stools’ and hence it was necessary to proactively choose the focus and recognise that an emphasis on language and social discourse could only be achieved at the expense of a more intensive engagement with each participant’s *prima facie* experience. Secondly, the experience of long term sobriety often involves challenging cultural norms, the ‘they’, and finding new ways of constructing oneself through first deconstructing and then reconstructing modes of self expression. Therefore a commentary on this aspect of a participant’s world view would seem less valuable in shedding light on the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment. Lastly I have some sympathy with the argument that

deconstructing existing social hegemonies and reconstructing new ones can actually be more prescriptive than may be initially assumed (see Medina 2008a).

Narrative analysis has a more intense focus on the structure and content of people's stories (e.g. Crossley 2000 and Gergen and Gergen 1998, cited in Smith et al. 2009) and along with discourse analysis has its roots in social constructionism. A more recent example of this type of methodology is critical narrative analysis (Langdridge 2007), where the researcher engages with the data in a critical form of 'imaginative variation', using ideas from appropriate social theories. This method allows the researcher to move beyond the apparent through a 'perspectival shift', where the emphasis is away from a focus on the lifeworld of the participant and his or her meanings to a critical analysis of the narrative world that both allows and limits the persons ways of talking about themselves (Langdridge 2007), and hence the phenomenon under investigation. Here again, this shift in focus away from a rich analysis of what is actually said does not suit this particular research question, although aspects of how the alcoholic is seen by society and therefore sees themselves may form the basis of further research in this area.

Template analysis (King 1998) could have been used in this study as based upon previous work (Medina 2008b) on the five key components of Everyday Courage, I feel that there may have been an appropriate framework, with pre-selected codes, within which the data collected could be understood. This is also the case with the Sheffield School (Ashworth 2003), where the text is interrogated based on existential schemas that are considered relevant to the qualitative investigation of human phenomena. Notwithstanding this, I am of the opinion that using a priori themes would have limited the scope of the data interpretation, prevented a meaningful reflexive engagement and run the risk of this research falling into the trap of finding what it is was looking for.

Quantative methodologies were not considered appropriate for this particular research question because, unlike the work of Pargament et al. (1988) referred to previously, the aim was not to make general claims about the population of recovering alcoholics using existing literature. Instead, the intention was to create new thinking with a rigorous interpretative phenomenological investigation of a small purposively chosen group of participants, the resultant themes of which may in turn lend themselves to future quantative enquiry.

### **3.8 Reflexivity**

Most Phenomenological research methodologies recognise that the researcher is an inclusive part of the world they are describing (Larkin, Watts and Clifton 2006) and as such play an active role in the construction of the research findings based on their original interest in the phenomenon, the reasons for that interest and crucially the construction of the research question, all of which influence what can and cannot emerge from the research itself (Willig 2007). Furthermore, any discoveries that are made are a function of the relationship between the researcher and the subject matter (Larkin, Watts and Clifton 2006), which could and should change throughout the research process. Therefore, rather than seeing reflexivity as a hindrance it is more helpful (as IPA suggests) to harness its potential as an inevitable and useful consequence of engaging in research with other people. In any event Colaizzi (1973) correctly identifies the importance of bracketing our presuppositions and assumptions by making them explicit at the outset of the research.

My interest in the area of recovery from addiction originated from my training in existential psychotherapy with its emphasis on notions of selfhood, struggle, freedom, personal responsibility and limitedness and its understanding of the importance of embracing paradox and dilemma in what we choose to do and how we choose to be. My work with one particular client, who was coming to terms with infertility and who identified as a long term sober member

of AA, prompted me to think more deeply about what recovery from alcoholism was actually about as I started to appreciate that cessation of drinking was just the beginning of a sober existence. I had also met other AA members through a friend who was in AA, whilst on holiday, and without the confines of the client therapist relationship, was able to gain more insight into what had become my central question and indeed concern, namely, that it appeared that many long term sober AA members had made fundamental changes in their lives, learnt to face the struggles of life without resorting to drink, developed a personal, spiritual and philosophical world view, and imperfectly, but resolutely, faced the everyday challenges of life and not sought to rest on their laurels.

My question was how could this be considered not the result of personal achievement but the result of handing oneself over to a Higher Power? I had a concern that these individuals were in some way missing out by not attributing this success to them-selves. By attending some open AA meetings and talking to more people I started to appreciate the self-other and self-otherness dimension of long term recovery in AA was far more nuanced than I, an non alcoholic outsider or indeed a new AA member may initially discern. So it was with the assumption of not knowing and the presupposition that things may not be as they seem that I formulated this research and started to think about paradox and what may be there as against what may be assumed to be there. I was also starting to think about whether or not the traditional suspicion, sometimes bordering on antipathy, between psychotherapy and twelve step recovery programmes was actually misplaced. Reflecting on these presuppositions, I became aware that I was starting to 'want to find' which of course would result in me learning much less.

Letting go, or surrendering my original assumptions about the lived experience of long term sobriety was the beginning of a parallel process that has continued throughout the interview and writing up stages of this research. I have started to understand that the paradox of self

surrender and self empowerment for me as the researcher is about challenging my desire for order and structure and letting go of striving for the perfect participant, the best interview and the flawless transcript. This ability to accept (hand over) is juxtaposed with the need to effect (take control) in AA and positioning myself at different points on this continuum at different stages of the process has characterised my reflexive engagement with this research and enriched my own understanding of this fundamental human dilemma. Keeping a research diary, as my thoughts and ideas were developing, maintaining a regular dialogue with my research supervisor and engaging in personal therapy were all important ways in which I was able to continually assess the fluidity of my own position in relation to this topic and hence monitor my inevitable role in co-constructing the research findings.

### **3.9 Validity**

Developing adequate tools to assess the validity of IPA research projects and qualitative studies in general has been of central importance in allowing the knowledge produced to gain credibility through establishing quality and hence increasing then potential for findings to 'travel further' in contributing towards a 'critical mass' of data that can impact fully on contemporary psychological thought. Willig (2001) defines validity as "the extent to which our research, describes measures or explains what it aims to describe measure or explain" (p16). Amongst others, Smith et al. (2009), Shinebourne (2011) and Langdridge (2007) all refer to Yardley's (2000) identification of four key dimensions by which studies using qualitative methods can be assessed as being useful. These criteria are; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance.

**Sensitivity to context** In IPA studies refers to having a clear methodological and epistemological rationale, sensitivity to relevant literature and a focus on recruiting a purposive sample of participants from a particular context with a particular lived experience. This

sensitivity also extends to taking care when analysing “the raw material”, including “a considerable number of verbatim extracts”, maintaining a firm commitment to ground “all analytic claims in the participants’ accounts” thereby “giving the participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check the interpretations being made (Smith et al. 2009, p180-181). In terms of this study I have clearly set out my methodological and epistemological rationale in this section and also sought to deal sensitively with extant literature in my literature review. I have a keen appreciation of the destructive nature of alcoholism and the utmost respect for those who have struggled to overcome it. This belief ,along with my training as a therapist and my commitment to reflexivity have helped me seek to ensure that I have treated all participants with respect and sensitivity both in terms of my physical interactions with them and my psychological engagement with their interview transcripts.

Yardley’s second criterion, commitment and rigour, can be demonstrated through prolonged engagement with the topic and immersion in the data of the research (Shinebourne 2011). In IPA, rigour also refers to the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand and the completeness of the analysis (Smith et al. 2009). In terms of this study I have been particularly interested in the area of recovery from addiction and theories of the self for the last 6 years. I have systematically used the IPA methodology, with its idiographic stance and demand for data generated interpretations (see results and discussion) and not compromised on the appropriateness of participants recruited in terms of the length of their sobriety (8 years plus).

Transparency and coherence make up Yardley’s third criterion for assessing validity and relates to the clarity and cogency of the research findings (Langdridge 2007).The IPA researcher is required to give specific details of the research process and stages of the results analysis (Shinebourne 2011) (see current section, results section and appendices of this study) and be able to demonstrate to the reader a clear grounding for the conclusions they draw concerning the experiential claims of the research subjects (see results section, discussion



and conclusions of this study). Langdridge (2007) questions Yardley's fourth criterion, which encourages an assessment of the impact and importance of a particular piece of research by referring to the "commodification of knowledge" (p157). I nonetheless feel that whilst a study must be primarily judged in relation to its own terms of reference, its ability to enthuse the reader, stimulate thought, encourage debate, point the way to further research and contribute something tangible and relevant are all legitimate and important considerations when designing and writing up a piece of research. By focusing on aspects of the surrendered self, this study seeks to contribute new thinking in the area of recovery from addiction, stimulate debate in the psychotherapeutic and addiction communities, widen the existential understanding of addiction and inform existential psychotherapeutic practice with clients who identify as recovering alcoholics (see literature review, discussion and conclusions of this study).

Smith et al. (2009) also suggest that an independent audit is a useful way of dealing with validity. In terms of this study, my process of theme production was discussed and the resultant theme tables (see Appendices 6, 7, 8) were audited by a fellow DProf student on three separate occasions during the research. My research supervisor has also been able to track theme generation and the relevance of annotations to actual text from my pilot study onwards.

## **3.10 Method**

### **3.10.1 Design**

This research was designed to be conducted with a small, purposively chosen and largely homogenous sample of individuals for whom it was assumed that the research question would be meaningful (Smith et al. 2009). Semi structured interviews lasting approximately sixty

minutes were used for data collection and the resultant digital recordings were transcribed verbatim. Semi structured interviews are viewed as a “flexible tool of data collection” that is “consonant with IPA” and “allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas that arise” (Smith and Osborn 2003, p55). IPA involves deploying a system of data analysis that allows the researcher to work in the margins of each text to identify themes and eventually integrate them in a separate table of meaningful clusters of superordinate themes and sub themes first within and then across cases (Willig 2001). These themes are translated into an account of the participants’ responses which takes the form of a narrative argument interspersed with verbatim extracts from transcripts to support what is being suggested. Care is always taken to distinguish clearly between what the participant said and the researcher’s interpretation or account of it (Smith and Osborn 2003).

### **3.10.2 Participant recruitment**

I have attended AA open meetings during the last 2 years and having received ethical approval for this research, which included carrying out a full risk assessment, (see Appendices 1 and 2) before I began to recruit potential participants. This was done by disseminating printed information about the study and by talking to individuals at the beginning and end of meetings. Participants who took part also recommended the research to others (termed ‘snowballing’). Potential participants had to have been sober for at least 8 years, be attending AA meetings regularly, have an ongoing relationship with a sponsor and most importantly have a desire to talk about the spiritual aspect of their recovery and sobriety. There has been no purposive sampling with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or relationship status. Six participants were recruited who attended AA meetings in various locations in the

London area. In terms of sample size Smith et al. (2009) recommend between four and ten as being appropriate and suggest that “it is more problematic to try to meet IPA’s commitments with a sample size that is ‘too large’, than with one that is too small” (p51).

### **3.10.3 Research questions**

Framing the research questions for this study focussed my attention on the ‘sharp end’ of IPA as a methodology (i.e. in what manner does it specifically seek to engage the participant). Smith and Osborn (2003) affirm that “research questions in IPA projects are usually framed broadly and openly. There is no attempt to test a predetermined hypothesis of the researcher; rather, the aim is to explore flexibly, and in detail, an area of concern” (p53). Formulating the interview schedule was also an important part of my reflexive engagement with the research process as it required me to let go of wanting to know something through focused questioning and thus open myself to wondering what would emerge when a participant’s attention was drawn to certain aspects of their personal world view that were considered potentially relevant to exploring this phenomenon. This included inviting participant’s views on religion, spirituality, self surrender, the Higher Power, alcoholism, courage and freedom. For a full list of research questions and follow up prompts see (Appendix 5).

Having tested these questions in my pilot study I used the opportunity to refine them further which allowed me to elicit more data from participants on how the Higher Power was experienced on a daily basis as well as link the concept of Higher Power with recovery. Being a semi-structured interview, my intention was introduce these questions as organically as possible and thereby provide the maximum opportunity for the ‘experiential expert’ to tell their own story (Smith and Osborn 2003), and leave room for data to emerge that hadn’t been anticipated but was considered useful and pertinent. Recruitment of participants began in

March 2010 and interviews took place between June and August 2010 in a dedicated counselling room in my own premises.

#### **3.10.4 Method of Analysis**

Having listened to each interview recording twice, to revisit the atmosphere and tone of the encounter, I read and re read the verbatim transcripts before beginning my first analytical reading. At this point, I made initial notes in the left hand margin that examined the semantic comments and language used on a very exploratory level. My focus was descriptive and phenomenological as I tried to “stay close to the participant’s explicit meaning” (Smith et al. 2009, p79) (see Appendix 6, Theme Development). I then moved on to a more interpretative engagement which involved a line by line analysis of each transcript and reference to my initial notes in the left hand margin. I began to identify emergent patterns looking for convergence, divergence, commonality and nuance (Smith et al. 2009). These interpretative comments were noted in the right hand margin of the transcript, for each case then across the six cases. As Smith et al. (2009) suggest; I felt that my experience of theme development was the result of a dialogue between myself as the researcher, the coded data and my own psychological knowledge, the latter of which also informed the development of a structural relationship between the themes.

This process was by no means linear and involved certain themes initially emerging as potentially significant and then receding in importance as my engagement with the whole body of the material deepened. Working within the hermeneutic circle was particularly important at this stage to ensure that my interpretative ideas, expressed in a table of themes, were valid, coherent and had emerged from an authentic engagement with the content of each participant’s interview. Writing up the results was a continuation of this iterative and reflexive process and involved continually referring back to verbatim transcripts, my margin notes and

my theme tables (see Appendix 8) to ensure that the results were able to be traced back through the various stages of the research and also that they were authentic and ethically accurate. I identified five superordinate themes, which were supported by 13 sub themes which in turn had been generated from some 560 emergent themes across the full body of data.

### **3.11 Ethical awareness**

I was guided in this research by the belief that whilst there is always some level of risk associated with participating in research of this nature it is important that participants are not being asked to take risks over and above those they normally would in everyday life or expose themselves to an increased possibility that they will come to any harm. This entailed considering the participants fundamental rights to autonomy, privacy and non-maleficence, as well as my obligation to promote justice and beneficence both in carrying out and disseminating my work. Participants were informed in advance via the Participant's Information Sheet (see Appendix 3) of the nature and purpose of the research and location of the interviews, as well as of the expected benefits and the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part. I highlighted the fact that participation in the research was entirely voluntary and that the participant could withdraw from the process at any point without giving any reason or there being any consequences.

Debriefing took place after each interview and then again 2 weeks hence. This provided an opportunity to clear up any misconceptions about the nature of the research that may have arisen as a result of going through the interview process and allowed me to address any other concerns that a participant may have had or help them to arrange any other support they may have needed as a result of participating in the research. I also ensured that any feedback

gained from these debriefings, especially after the pilot interview, was integrated into my research procedures, thus avoiding replication of any practice that may have caused concern.

Before commencing the research I had already consulted individuals within the AA community about my research and sought their opinions as to what the potential impact might be on those taking part. Their feedback was that as all the research participants would be long term sober (8 years plus) and as such, well used to talking about their relationship with alcohol and philosophy of life within AA, it was therefore unlikely that participating in this research would result in an unacceptably adverse reaction. I was mindful however that talking in detail about their sobriety and their spirituality with a non alcoholic, who is outside the AA movement, could increase the chance of an adverse emotional reaction and I therefore also had a list of local counsellors in the area on hand that could be given to participants who showed any signs of distress or requested help in seeking emotional support at the end of the interview or at follow up. There was an 'appropriate exclusion' in this research to protect the health and well being of potential participants therefore they needed to be over 8 years sober and be able to report that they are not currently in a problematic place concerning their continued sobriety. It was also the case that participants were, by definition, regularly attending a support group, AA, and had an ongoing relationship with a sponsor who would be able to provide emotional support.

I was also mindful of the fact that research can develop in ways that raise unforeseen ethical implications. This is especially true for qualitative research where the developing nature of the research and the emphasis on researcher reflexivity required me to undertake periodic reviews of how the research was developing from an ethical perspective and address any issues or dilemmas that arose with my supervisor, peer reviewer and where appropriate with the participants themselves.

Before commencing the research I had familiarised myself with the British Psychological Society's literature on the principles, approval procedure and code of conduct for carrying out

psychological research (2009) and had also read more widely concerning ethical perspectives in qualitative research (Bond 2000, Willig 2011, Langdridge 2007, van Deurzen 1998 and Cohn 2005). As a result I have come to appreciate that ethical awareness involves more than 'ticking the boxes', and in fact requires a heightened awareness of the ethical dimension in real time encounters with unique individuals which is really where principles of autonomy, non maleficence, justice and trustworthiness are brought to bear, in the moment, in what we chose to say and do. In terms of the ethics of interpretation I was guided by Willig (2011), who reminds us that to interpret another's experience means to claim privileged access to its underlying meaning and thus have the right to translate it into something different. Accordingly, she suggests that 'open and tentative interpretations' that amplify meaning are far more ethical than 'closed and certain types' of interpretation that are aimed at defining truth (Willig 2011).

In terms of avoiding any harm by a breach in confidentiality I have restricted the scope of any disclosure to that which is consistent with the professional purposes of my research, made constant efforts to anonymise key details and ensured that data collected was stored in a secure, locked area to avoid any inadvertent disclosure. All interview recordings will be erased upon completion of my DProf.

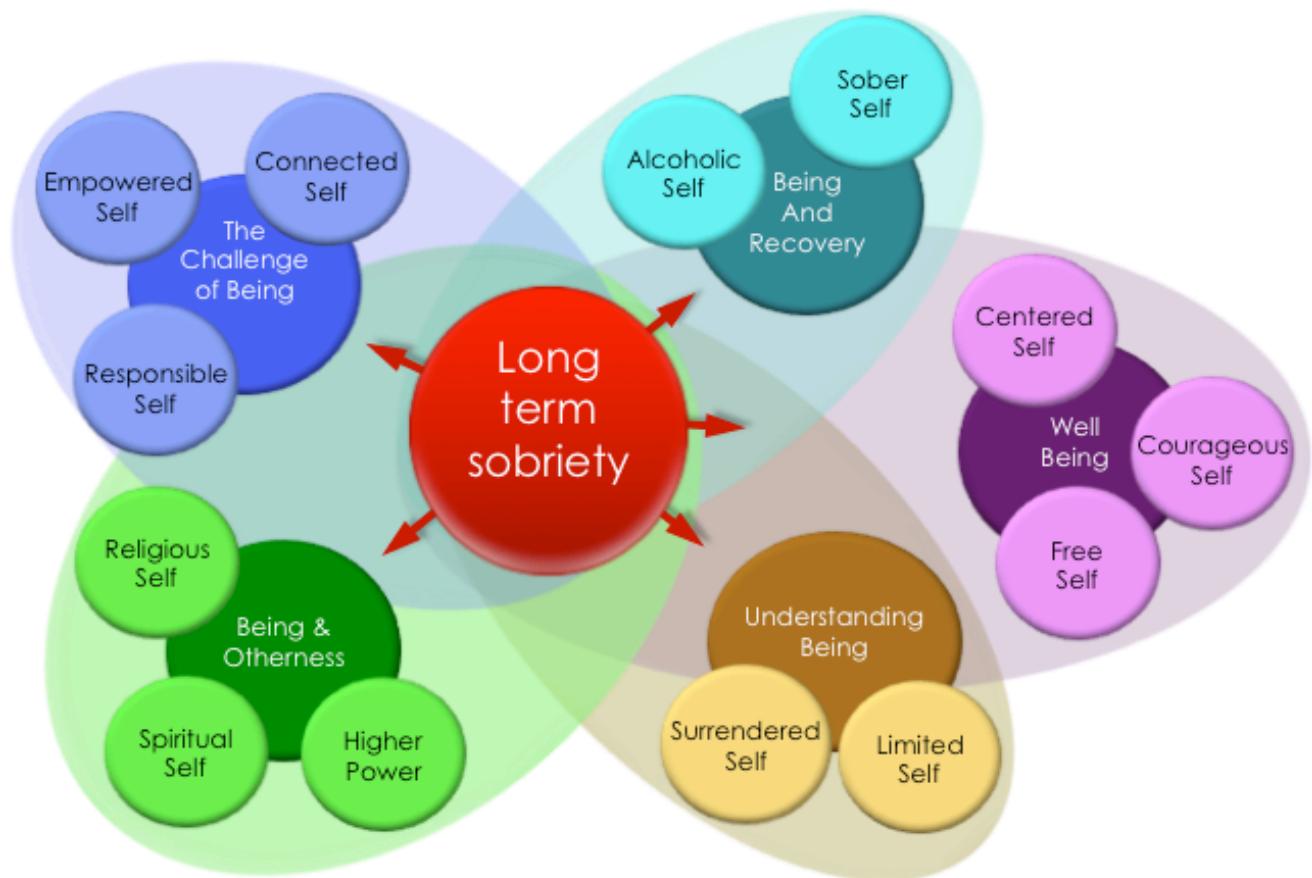
## **Chapter 4      Results and Analysis**

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The six participants in this project consisted of three men and three women with an age range of 35-65 and a mean age of 47. Two of the men identified as being gay, one of whom was single and the other in a long term relationship. The third man was single. One of the women was married, one was widowed and one was divorced. Two of the women were mothers. All of the participants lived in the London area, although had a range of nationalities and ethnic origins. The length of sobriety ranged from 8 years to 22 years, with the mean length being 16.5 years.

Five superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts of my interviews with these participants. These were: The Challenge of Being, Being and Otherness, Being and Recovery, Well Being and Understanding Being. These superordinate themes were derived from and supported by various key themes or subordinate themes that were generated as a result of a double hermeneutic engagement with each interview transcript. Both sets of themes (see table below and appendix one) were conceptualised and illustrated by various direct quotes from the participants themselves.





**Figure 1 - Superordinate and Subordinate Themes**

#### **4.1 Superordinate Theme 1: The Challenge of Being**

This superordinate theme refers to the participants' experiences of becoming aware that being alive or more literally 'being here' in-the-world-with-others presents certain challenges to each of us individually. It communicates an awareness on the part of the participants, attained through a sober way of living, that although life is given to us through birth, it is up to each of us to make something meaningful of it from very soon after that. The subordinate themes that make up this category are: The Connected Self, The Responsible Self and The Empowered Self. The concepts of self and selfhood have been introduced above and are discussed in more detail later in the study.

#### 4.1.1 The Connected Self

Frances describes her awareness of a shift in attitude that had taken place as a result of starting to attend AA:

*I was never a joiner; I was never a participant if I could help it in most things. And I'm still a bit like that; I've a tendency to isolate. But what I realise, and I was lucky with the people I fell in with, I found I liked them, the groups of people I had coffee with, the people I socialised with after the meetings and so on were good fun (381-388).*

She was challenging some of her preconceived ideas about not really liking others and not fitting in or being accepted in groups and at the same time experiencing how important it was for her to connect with others and how good it could make her feel. Vicky also acknowledges the human need to be connected but her words also imply that she retains an awareness of herself as not being absorbed by the group: *If I have any craving for that sort of community, which I think a lot of people have and go for, I get it through the AA meetings (352-354).* Lena similarly comments on this choice of group belonging, which seems conscious and active in contrast to some individuals who can feel trapped into belonging to groups that they don't really identify with: *Because by and large the people who, well, in a practical sense it makes me feel more human, because these are my people they're people like me (485-488).* There is a difference in emphasis for Howard who gives voice to the fact that feeling connected and 'being with' is not always easy to achieve, even with long term affiliation to the fellowship and that the challenge of staying connected to others is a constant struggle for him.

*There have been long periods where I've just felt as if I was on my own. And that's not a really good place to be in, because I've been on my own before and felt as if... there's been a disconnection, and then there's been times when I've felt more connected (840-846).*

Brian similarly acknowledges that being connected to others can sometimes be difficult; *Well when I'm okay, I'm okay with other people. When I'm not okay, when I'm not doing well, I'm easily irritated. Or I don't want to be around anybody. I can isolate really easy* (324-327). Despite these difficulties, both participants seem to have undergone a change in outlook as a result of their long term membership of AA in terms of recognising that overcoming these difficulties can have a positive impact on their well-being. Brian says *people are a positive thing* (335-336) and Howard describes how he gets *more elevated by people* (Howard 550-551). Although Christopher's sentence tails off, he too places strong emphasis on relatedness and sobriety *I have to connect, I have to... Because otherwise I just don't get the chance to... of myself I am nothing*.1036-1039). 'Nothing' here does not relate to no-thing but is Christopher's affirmation of the need to express himself and 'be with' to feel himself as a distinct and worthwhile being. He continues by graphically illustrating that being connected is not only about being in physical contact but is as much about an orientation to the world and to others.

*It's called Love Dogs and it's about finding that the connection between a dog calling for its master, it is the connection, that calling is the connection, that whining, whether you get an answer or not is immaterial, it is the actual act of calling. It's the bond. So I think it's... yeah, it's that bond between me and another human being.* (56-64).

Over the years, engaging with others becomes the cornerstone of Frances's sobriety; *Being with others and sharing with others....that's the thing that I find works for me* (420-421). She believes that she *would never have got through without the help of other people* (786-787) and whilst she identifies the support of her grown up children as important she asserts that it is *being with others doing the same thing, doing the not drinking* (391-392) that is ultimately significant. She acknowledges that *it's the fellowship as a whole, it's other people and what they say* (25-26) that she finds helpful; *you share it and they share back their experience about*

*what they may have done in a very similar set of circumstances* (558-560). Lena also regards the meetings as being of primary importance; *I might just hear somebody saying a very similar scenario and how they got out.* (1035-1036)

By saying that when *the shit hits the fan, don't have a drink, go to the meeting, let people know what's happened* (923-924), Frances reveals how this connectedness to a group of people is both cathartic and of practical use in helping her to stay sober. She also clarifies that it is staying connected to the people themselves that is useful rather than the room or any rituals as such: *Some weeks I don't go but I always keep in touch with people on the phone and so on* (399-400). Howard identifies this sense of belonging as helping him at difficult times when the thought of picking up a drink is very strong. He affirms, *what stopped me was having commitments in AA, and having friendships in AA* (412-414). Lena also recognises that *when I can't see my way out of the woods, I talk to people that I trust* (1033-1034), whilst Christopher adds further clarity by saying, *for me specifically as a recovering alcoholic it's the bond between myself and one other recovering alcoholic* (36-39).

These participants are describing a certain type of connectedness that is not about the 'chains that bind' or becoming everyman but is specifically about togetherness, reciprocity and an outward orientation where the balance between self and other is largely maintained, something that they all acknowledge was not present during their drinking days. Christopher sums up this balance well in saying *...and through getting to know them a little better I could actually define a bit more about who I was* (317-320).

#### **4.1.2 The Responsible Self**

In some way or another all the participants describe how belonging to AA has both required and enabled them to take personal responsibility for their lives, something that is a marked contrast to their behaviour whilst drinking. Howard views the decision to go to AA as the first

step in taking responsibility; *I went to AA because I knew the drinking wasn't good* (276-277). Christopher also understands the importance of attendance at meetings as the first step in taking responsibility; *my job was to turn up and do the work, and do it well* (448-449). He sees doing the work (the 12 steps) as pivotal and explains that *actually all other situations become based upon it* (893-894). Brian juxtaposes the perception of totally handing over, often focussed on by non members, with the reality of taking responsibility, which he sees as being intrinsic to the AA formula: He says, *I think a lot of the practices in AA are about taking responsibility. However, from the outside it could look as if it isn't* (165-167). Frances also communicates her belief that taking responsibility for ones own life is a core message in AA when she says; *... and that's a thing in AA people always say get out there and take action* (1020-1021).

In connecting responsibility with taking action Frances is accepting that thinking and talking about being responsible isn't enough and that meaningful responsibility is also about enactment. Lena concurs with this view in asserting that, *it is through practical application. Once I accept that I'm not controlling the whole thing, but I should do my practical thing* (1202-1205). This of course starts with not drinking, but in long term sobriety it is often about so much more.

Howard introduces the idea that taking responsibility is also about recognising that there is no universal right answer and that AA encourages him to appreciate that, *I need to do my own... make my decisions and trust that the decisions I'm making are healthy for me* (200-2002). In the same way Lena maintains that *it's solve your problem, come up with a solution, but to me that totally fits in with AA* (441-443). She uses humour to explain herself further:

*There's a Jewish joke about Moray praying to win the lottery, and suddenly he hears his voice, and God says, 'Moray, meet me half way, buy a ticket'* (393-397). *And there's also a Quaker*

*expression, 'Pray but move thy feet.' It's not that I just sit there, I'm not a puppet, I'm born with common sense and intelligence, and I am meant to use that (397-402).*

The message in the above extract is about how it can in fact be detrimental to be overly reliant on God. Frances also identifies this over reliance as being problematic but this time she is referring to other people. She affirms that an important part of her journey in AA was about thinking *I cannot keep relying on other people to look after me (737-739)* and *I have to take responsibility for my own life (732-733)*. Whilst this is a meaningful notion for all of us to understand it seemed particularly important and present for Frances as it allowed her to recognise that *nobody else could take responsibility for my drinking except me (342-343)* and that *drinking was my problem and nobody else's (336-337)*. Whilst remembering her desire to blame others for her drinking, Vicky focuses on the dynamics of her relationship with her sponsor who she says didn't *mind what you do as long as you're willing to pick up the tab (1366-1367)*. She also resonates with the other participants in saying; *where the AA journey is leading me is that there has to be a certain amount of responsibility for your own thoughts and actions (170-173)* and *I also knew that this time around it was up to me to do it, nobody else was going to do it for me (490-492)*.

The dynamic tension between self and other and self and otherness is important to all the participants in making sense of their sober lives. The extract below shows how Frances has made this important connection between the idea of taking responsibility for her own actions and openness to something outside of her embodied self and the rewards of engaging fully in her life when she says:

*Yeah I think the old expression God helps those who help themselves. You get out there; you do what you can and sometimes you just, you get the feeling that then a Higher Power takes pity and says, 'right you've done a lot of action, were going to move it up a little, move it up a gear and we'll put you in a good place now' (1029-1035).*

This delicate balance between taking responsibly and letting go and more specifically not making the mistake of feeling that AA is about total surrender and waiting for life to happen is also verbalized by Lena when she describes how, *I'm going to cross the road in a rubbish way and maybe get run over and killed, and that was meant to be. I can't do that far on the surrender front. And that's not how I interpret AA* (433-439). In a similar vein, Brian draws on his own experience of being single in recognising the difference between 'wishing for' and 'working for':

*Well, okay, I'll use an example, like relationship status.... Now, it's up to me, to get out there and put myself out there. And so, if someone's going to come into my life, if I'm going to get help, or that person is going to come into my life, I need to be open for it, I can't just throw it in the box and then sit in my living room and think that someone's going to knock on my door.* (147-158).

There would appear to be an understanding amongst these participants, achieved in conjunction with the AA, that taking responsibility is by no means an all or nothing experience in an existence where there is so much we can't control. Thus the 'challenge of being' in everyday life becomes about maintaining a fluid understanding and a behavioural adaptability towards knowing when to gather in and when to let go.

#### **4.1.3 The Empowered Self**

For these participants, the idea of taking personal responsibility for their lives is closely linked to feeling more empowered as individuals. There would also appear to be a much deeper appreciation amongst the participants of what constitutes personal empowerment which is often juxtaposed with their drinking selves or their pre AA selves and is as much about changes in perception and perspective as it is about action and resilience.

The ability to struggle and get through the difficult times, when the impulse might have been to drink is seen as empowerment and is associated with recovery. When talking about her Higher Power, Vicky says:

*It allows you to acknowledge that there is a struggle. And it allows you to realise that the coping mechanisms you started to adopt as a child you can't do as your life becomes more complex (1066-1070).*

There is a sense in which Vicky sees the acceptance of struggle as constituting her growing up, as she also mentions; *it's much more on a day to day basis, empowering me to not act out like a toddler ( 320-322)* and connects this with realising *there is this very depressive side of me, this drinking side of me, this ability to cause mayhem for myself and others, and maybe that's that part of that house, but I now have tools not to be pulled into it (750-754).*

Frances attaches great importance to the ability to understand *that you can take control and manage your life with help and humility (887-889)* and in so doing is recognising that empowerment is not about being all powerful or more specifically feeling all powerful which can often be the alcoholic's fantasy. Frances also clarifies that *by humility I don't mean humiliation (724)* which seems an important distinction for her to make in realising the difference between openness and acceptance and a tendency to defer to others and not prioritise herself when necessary. She sees the foundation stone of this empowerment as being able to, *accept where you're at in your life (128-129)* and believes that *if you can get real acceptance then you can move on (129-130)*. This idea of journeying is also picked up by Howard who affirms;

*Now that I go to AA and I have my Higher Power, I can go to places where I just couldn't go to before (940-942) and in every way its empowered me. Because I'll go into situations which used to baffle me. There would be situations no way I could go into (1054-1061).*



This ability to move on is also connected to Frances's awareness that she now has choices, *that's the thing.....I have choices today* (889-890) as well as her preparedness to *make the plan and if something goes wrong you deal with it when it goes wrong* (288-289). Lena declares the going to AA has helped her to realise; *I have the right to change* (1225), which is a simple but powerful declaration of her inalienable right as a human being to self define. She goes on to explain further that sobriety has engendered *the belief that there's no reason why I shouldn't be able to be happy and achieve the things that I want to achieve* (1061-1063).

These types of insights reveal a mind-body or a perception-action unity and the below extract from Brian's interview sheds further light on how these participants seem to understand the dynamics of psychological empowerment;

*Over years of being in AA, teaching myself to think, you know, to think a certain way. And I guess you could call it brainwashing yourself, but I like to think of it as I take my mind to the gym, and like I workout my mind, because if I'm sitting there, and I'm in a rut, and I'm having these awful thoughts go through my head, I snap out of it, I stop myself from thinking like that* (209-217).

Running away from self and quite literally not be able to bear oneself is often at the heart of chronic drinking. Christopher regards self empowerment as being about *facing up to self. Doesn't mean I necessarily like it all the time* (549-550) and links this self acceptance to being able to be with others: *It's the connection between one human and another. It's not definable. It's the strength that comes out of that* (21-23). Frances alludes to the challenge of being-with-others and foregrounds the need to *forget about the impression you're making and to just be there and be with everybody else and do it* (529-531).

As well as being with others, surrendering to otherness or the Higher Power is also regarded as a source of personal strength for the participants. Brian describes it as *faith in my own*

*power, faith in myself. Yeah, faith in the Higher Power, but also faith in myself (771-772).* Two of the participants describe the relationship with their Higher Power as being a paradox. Lena says; *and so I think there is a paradox there; that I feel smaller in relation to it, and that gives me more ability to enjoy, and to maximise my own life actually (718-721).* And Frances affirms that, *it's the paradox and if you can let go of the power, the power of control, then you kind of get power back (122-132).*

In summary this theme has drawn together the change in perception of self, others and the world around them that these participants have undergone in moving from destructive drinking towards long term sobriety. The challenge of being is recast and better informed and a sense of personal freedom and personal safety seems to dominate. These new understandings are essentially philosophical and are shared and re-enlivened by sustaining the connection to AA.

## **4.2 Superordinate Theme 2: Being and Otherness**

This super ordinate theme encapsulates the participants' explanations of how they perceive their relationship with otherness as a function of their long term relationship with AA as both a spiritual and practical programme. Each participant's own unique belief system is foregrounded at the crossroads between the personal, social and spiritual dimensions of their lives. The subordinate themes that make up this category are: The Religious Self, The Spiritual Self and the Higher Power.

### **4.2.1 The Religious Self**

When talking about religion all the participants expressed strong opinions and on occasion used vivid language to communicate their opposition to and fear of organised religion as well as the pain it had caused them and others in their lives. As the extract below shows, Frances

spoke very firmly about her views on organised religion and how theistic faith had affected her life growing up in Ireland.

*What it meant for me I suppose, a force of tyranny, I would say, because, for example, my poor old mother was always banging on about how we really shouldn't have Protestant friends and things like that. And I think also it created problems in life in that, I mean I had my first child before I got married, well I didn't have him, but I got pregnant before I got married and that caused a lot of havoc and tears and weeping. And when I look back now sometimes I can still feel a bit angry about all that because it was just not necessary. When I see kids today and they don't get married, I have a niece who's got three children and just got married, she lives with her partner and everything's fine. And I just think what was that all about, when I look back (459-474)*

Brian also looks back to his childhood and says *I was raised with the punishing God, and I was threatened with God all the time (246-248)*. Howard uses even stronger language and imagery to describe his catholic religious upbringing which has connotations of seeing himself as being crucified. He says, *it was nailed into me (536)* and *we'd go to church every Sunday, and it was like a fear driven God (507-508)*. This idea of God as a tool of control is echoed by Brian; *I think my parents, instead of introducing me to the loving God, they introduced me to a fearful God to help them raise us. So we weren't out of control (262-265)*. Frances picks up on the same theme when she distinguishes between 'types of God' and comments that *it would be very comforting if there was a nice benign presence sitting up there....as long as they were a nice person and not sending down evil bolts of lightning (611-614)*.

Separating the message from its messenger features prominently in most of the participant interviews where religion's attempt to be a source for good is regarded as having been spoilt by its male representatives. Vicky clarifies:

*I do believe in the basic promise, I think Buddhism, Hinduism, the Koran, the Bible, if you read all their basic texts without seeing how it's been interpreted by nutty zealots or crazy Irish priests I believe it's good stuff (345-350).*

Referring to different religions Christopher similarly comments that,

*And I think every single one of those has useful messages about living together, getting on with fellow man, getting on with the planet, the universe. Coming to a place of peace and acceptance of one's self. They've also come along with huge prejudices and edicts (147-153).*

In the same vein Howard says, *I think the teachings are lovely, and they're healthy and they'll elevate people, but a lot of the scriptures they're just open for interpretation from bad people. So religion and I do not mix (529-533).*

Lena reacts very strongly to the idea of religion telling her what to believe and how to believe, which she clearly sees as a personal violation; *to me it feels intrusive, and almost like rape, when someone is telling me how to interpret God (813-833).* In accordance, Howard states that *it's the badness of the people; it's not actually about the teachings (527-529).* Later on in her interview Lena goes on to recognise, *I suppose that's why I don't really like personification of God, because I think how dare you, Joe Shmo, paint a picture of God for everybody (1461-1464).*

In addition, there is a clear antipathy amongst the participants for the way that some people have *the George Bush view, that oh, I have a hot line to God (Lena 348-349).* Frances sees *the danger is when you think you've got a direct line to God (635-636), that would make me God wouldn't it.... If I knew what God wanted....that would be very dangerous (646-649).* Both Howard and Christopher focus on the leader of their familial religion and in so doing disclose an inner anger and in Howard's case a desire for retribution. Christopher is exasperated; *The Pope just... come and tell that person this is right or this isn't right. I'm tired of encyclicals;*

*tired, please stop, you know. Who are you? You know!* (675-679). Howard is more overtly angry; *religion as in the Pope sense, because if the Pope was to walk into this flat today I would slap him, because I think he's a nasty piece of work* (519-523).

The idea of tolerance or the lack thereof is also picked up by the participants when talking about religion. Frances acknowledges *how much comfort people can get from it as long as they don't force it down other people's throats* (144-146), whilst Christopher says of the Catholic Church in Nigeria and their views on homosexuality, *now I have no problem with them believing. I have a problem with them acting out on my beliefs* (172-175). Brian expresses how religion made him feel like an outsider; *I had this fear associated with religion, because deep down I knew I wasn't adding up to everything I was supposed to add up to* (250-253).

Frances alludes to a more personal creation of otherworldliness that AA has offered her in appreciating that *some other people....they will rest there, as it were, and they will feel quite content with.... the old God* (99-103). Vicky describes her relief at not having to accept the 'old God' to be a member of AA; *I was very frightened when I came in because I thought if you have to believe in God I can't* (54-56). Both these comments point the way to a more personal spirituality that is allowed for and positively encouraged in AA that, despite these strong anti religious views and as evidenced below, is apparent in all the participants' accounts of their journey in sobriety.

#### **4.2.2 The Spiritual Self**

In attempting to define spirituality the participants reveal something very personal and unique about their understanding of what it is to be-in-the-world after drinking. Frances declares that *It's very individual that's all; it's a completely individual thing for different people* (60-61). In saying '*that's all*' and her double use of *individual* both imply that she regards spirituality as something that can potentially be lost in the attempt to find a one size fits all definition and also

that a person's spiritual understanding is something to be accepted and understood as opposed to questioned or undermined.

Frances also talks about experiencing a spiritual awakening within herself as a result of joining the AA programme. She says: *To begin with I thought it was about.... thou shalt not.... because that's what I had experienced in the past* (537-541), but eventually came to appreciate that *it's all spiritual. It's a practical spiritual programme* (507-508). Howard compares the spirituality he finds in AA with his upbringing, again with a sense of frustration and missed opportunity which characterises his contributions around the topic of religion and spirituality : *I'd go to AA and I'd be hearing people's life experiences and it's going straight to my heart, it's going straight into my body. And that should have been the stuff I should have got as a kid growing up* (540-545). Brian focuses on the spiritual freedom that he believes AA offers to its members: *I think the literature keeps it very open for everybody to come in with their own belief system, and to develop it, or to have no belief system, and to develop that into whatever they see fit* (570-574).

Again, referring to AA Vicky says that she regards spirituality as being intrinsic; *I see the spiritual side of it as being a direct outcome. I think it allows me to live what I believe the spiritual way of life is. To try and put others ahead of myself, in appropriate circumstances, not always* (897-902). This extract also shows that Vicky associates spirituality with humility, particularly in the context of self and other. Christopher also reflects this view by saying *Spirituality tends to suggest to me that it's about how I conduct myself.... to be in good spirit is to think of others, just for a second, is enough* (702-706). Frances correspondingly equates spirituality with personal morality and uses it as a framework within which she can incorporate her values and beliefs into her everyday decisions. She describes it as *trying to lead a good life....where you do the next right thing, whatever that is, in any kind of circumstances.*

(502-504). This theme of how the spiritual affects the practical and the cognitive is similarly picked up by Christopher who directly relates it to 'alcoholic behaviour' in the extract below:

*I liked the definition that I was given once, which was particularly germane to recovering alcoholic addicts, which was, 'If I don't take a drink or a drug today and I don't tell a lie that's about as spiritual as it gets' (690-695)*

In their accounts the participants additionally address the idea of spirituality as faith, energy, mystery and uncertainty. Lena explains; *I think synchronicity is a good way to describe it. It's the indescribable, that's the problem. It's the indescribable. (Laughing) And it's the inexplicable (594-597)*. Vicky in turn regards it *as odd that when I really do talk as if to an external entity, a spiritual entity, my answers come (98-100)*. This resonates with Lena's statement that *there's something about accepting but not knowing (37-38)* and Frances's view that, *It wasn't cut and dried and it isn't cut and dried (56-57)*. Howard is similarly prepared to give up the ideas of uniformity, certainty and fixedness in favour of a more enlivening and personal relationship with otherness:

*There is something outside of us, and something that lives within us all because I've seen it through so many different people, people I love, people I don't like... You see things which are quite remarkable, which I've never, ever seen with people who study or who have got a religious upbringing ( 913-923).*

The idea of spirituality and spiritual awakening leading to an awareness of and an ability to tap into the energy of being itself is also discussed by the participants. Lena relates this energy specifically to AA when she affirms, *I had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps (897-898)* and *I think there is a particular energy in Alcoholics Anonymous (565-567)*. Brian says, *I just do believe there's so much energy out there, like in the air, everywhere (544-545)*. Howard goes one step further and talks about being able to feel the energy:

*Some places I go to, and I'll feel there's a presence there, I feel there's an energy there. There's other places I go to and I feel there's a real negative energy there. It's just like a... it's not something you see it's something you feel (240-247).*

Looking out and up is also associated with a sense of inner calm and self acceptance which would seem to define the spiritual dividend that these long term sober AA members appear to have benefited from: Brian describes how *being on a spiritual journey has enabled me to like myself and accept myself* (387-388) and Frances defines spirituality as *coming back to living comfortably with one's self* (525). Christopher regards his spirituality as enabling him to *hopefully grow to a place of understanding and peace* (293-295).

#### **4.2.3 The Higher Power**

The need to envision, believe in and then surrender to a power greater than oneself is initially the mechanism that allows the AA attendee to achieve a cessation in their drinking and latterly becomes the cornerstone of their long term sobriety. It is not surprising therefore that some of the participants understand the Higher Power in their lives to be about AA itself.

When talking about her understanding of and relation to her Higher Power, Vicky starts by saying; *the term Higher Power means to me basically the collective wisdom of the AA members who have stayed sober and gone before me* (23-25) and *I think my Higher Power is the AA programme* (108). She continues, *so I think in a way a Higher Power is my better self that is only accessed through using the AA programme and self-awareness* (152-155). Whilst Francis acknowledges that *it's a power greater than myself* (19), which has a quality of 'up there' and beyond, she also goes on to say that;

*I think the Higher Power it's the fellowship, it's the people and I think a lot of people will say that. It's the fellowship as a whole, its other people and what they say. It's something you can get from a meeting* (23-27).



Lena comments on the nature of the Higher Power as expressed in AA literature which she feels is *very cleverly and wonderfully written in that it really leaves it open to you, and doesn't force interpretation* (790-792) She also affirms that *there are as many members in Alcoholics Anonymous as there are interpretations of God or the Higher Power* (544-546). In a similar vein, Christopher sees the Higher Power as a matter of personal interpretation that differs for everybody in AA and astutely comments, *you wouldn't be doing this research with all these people if you thought it was all going to be the same, would you?* (816-818).

The location of the Higher Power is not however fixed for most of these participants, even those who see it as being directly associated with AA. Frances explains that, *sometimes I have felt it within myself* (28) which is also echoed in the below extract from Brian:

*I have a hard time deciding what it is, like if it's energy or what it is, but I also have another instinct that actually my Higher Power is inside. And I have that, because I think if I'm really silent, and I'm really in tune, meaning I just block out of the world, sometimes I intuitively know what to do, if I'm struggling* (651-658).

By blocking out the world and being with himself and knowing what to do when struggling Brian is linking his Higher Power to inner focus and space making as well as personal strength and resolve.

He explains further:

*Having a Higher Power, there's a door, there's a floor. So things may get bad, but I don't drop to that level. Like when I'm angry I'm just angry, I'm not in a rage. When I'm sad, I'm sad, but I'm not suicidal. You know, so there is that catch for my emotions, I don't go as deep down as I used to* (463-469).

Christopher concurs with this idea of the High Power being protective; *sometimes it's just the chair I'm sitting on. It holds my weight ... no matter what's going on in my head it's fairly sturdy*

(4-7). Howard regards the Higher Power as changing as he has *gotten older in recovery* (15). From being a more religious symbol when he first got sober he says *I think for me now the Higher Power is about the truth, it's about being authentic... its more about the Higher Power within me* (119-123). Lena also associates her changing view of the Higher Power with growing up in AA by reflecting, *I think I projected a more petty vision onto the Higher Power earlier on* (49-50). In turn, Frances seems able to embrace the fluidity of her sense of what otherness may be about as a result of her long term sobriety: *the Higher Power changes all the time, in a way, for me, all the time* (615-617).

The way these participants see their sober selves as being in a constant process of becoming presents the Higher Power as something intrinsically related to a person's self awareness and world view. In long term sobriety views of self and otherness are constantly maturing with the result that the Higher Power appears less polar and more nuanced, almost as the 'other power'. Lena continues thinking along these lines when she comments that *maybe the Higher Power is always a projection of ourselves* (79-80). She also describes the Higher Power as a *creative force* (103) that is *really vast and glorious and exciting* (106-107) and *is going to be very much about me, but ... it's not me, and it can surprise* (1471-1474). Christopher also sees the Higher Power in these universal terms and suggests that *a Higher Power is everything and is nothing* (758-759) and wants to protect his understanding of and access to his Higher Power from the actions of others: *I'm not fond of making it things that somebody can come and chop down. I marvel at the brilliance of an old oak tree but I don't want to make it my Higher Power. It is everything* (745-749).

For these participants another important dimension to protecting your Higher Power is not questioning or criticising anybody else's. This is not about blind acceptance but it is about fundamentally respecting another individual's right to create and maintain their own spiritual world. Howard wants to *let people develop their own sense of a Higher Power* (908-909) and

Brian explains that *we have respect for each other's Higher Powers, because we understand that this is of massive importance in our recoveries. So whatever you believe in, that's great, but believe it* (607-611). Frances adds to this way of thinking when she says, *I never presume to know what the Higher Power means for somebody else. I just know what my own is* (61-63). This knowing does not necessarily equate to always being sure about her Higher Power, which Frances illustrates when commenting that *sometimes it's very hard to pin down the Higher Power, for me* (98-99) and *sometimes I worry because I don't feel there is one* (63-64). Howard also clearly feels doubt at times but maintains the courage of faith: *sometimes you get a stronger connection and other times you don't get a connection and other times you think, shit maybe there's no such thing as the Higher Power* (826-830).

Throughout her interview Frances communicates that accepting a Higher Power into her life has made her *more tolerant and less judgmental* (711), helps her to *live comfortably* (583) and most illuminatingly of all, allows her *to change, to take action* (756). She connects the transcendental with the literal and the behavioural and is firm in her opinion that her understanding of otherness only comes alive in what she alone chooses to say, do and feel.

In summary this theme has given voice to the spiritual world of these long term sober AA members. There is a clear sense of repelling religious authority, taking ownership of their own belief systems and as a result being able to successfully encounter uncertainty and doubt. Most importantly of all, this understanding of being and otherness seems to have signalled a lasting change from the chronic self centeredness and downward gaze that characterized the participants' years of drinking, and thereby allowed a personal appreciation of the infinite to impact on what they do and how they live, everyday.

### 4.3 Superordinate Theme 3: Being and Recovery

This superordinate theme refers to the meaning the participants attach to identifying as an alcoholic, the extent to which personally reflecting on their drinking days has enabled them to understand more about their own being-in-the-world, both now and then, and the way in which their understanding of sobriety allows them to better manage their daily lives. The subordinate themes that make up this category are: The Alcoholic Self and the Sober Self.

#### 4.3.1 The Alcoholic Self

Telling the story of their drinking and facing the alcoholic self is seen by the participants as both the foundation of recovering and the essence of staying recovered. Frances says that, *I was just a pure and simple binge drinker and I'd done it for a very long time, 20-25 years and I'd seen the havoc that it had affected in my own life and in others* (162-164). Howard remembers *that there were times when I just couldn't stop drinking at all* (938-939) whilst Vicky explains that *if I do have a drink I want to carry on regardless.... and then my head will go everywhere* (893-896). Frances goes on to describe how her husband died of an alcohol related illness, and that one of her brothers and her sister had both battled with addiction to alcohol, one of whom went to AA for many years and the other of whom she describes as still being alive and alright *in a curious kind of way* (168-169). In referring to one of her brothers, who is still drinking, as being alright in a curious kind of way Frances alludes to a shrunken existence and firmly re-iterates; *I've seen what alcohol does and the suffering it causes* (169-170).

Focussing back on her own experience of drinking she details how *once I started drinking I could not stop until I was comatose and until I was in black out* (352-353) and with a more worried tone in her voice and a more frightened look on her face, goes on, *the thing about black out of course is you don't lie down gently and go to sleep, you're still on the rampage and*

*could get in a car and go driving. So, and of course having children I was terrified....you know it's a dreadful thing really (354-358).*

This theme of danger and drinking is picked up by Vicky when she says, *I was very much a fuck it drinker (277-278) and I was very aware that I was handing over my physical and mental health often to addictive substances and actually really rather bad men (226-229).* This compulsion to carry on despite the pain is clearly described in the extract below where Brian uses the metaphor of a boxing match:

*Like if you think about my alcoholism as being a constant fight, where I, I'm in the ring, and I'm constantly getting knocked out, but I'm constantly getting up again, and that is my life, and this goes on for years and years, and people are watching it outside, horrified, and they're telling me to get out of the ring, but I won't surrender (777-784).*

This image of carrying on regardless, shutting others out and being chronically ego centric features strongly in the participants' accounts of their drinking behaviour. Howard contends that *what I've seen with a lot of people with addiction, they're so obsessed about themselves; it's always like, 'Me, me, me, me, me' (573-576).* Lena adds to this way of thinking in commenting, *we're so driven with our own agendas (653-654)* and in going on to say,

*...like, it's all about what I want, and things are going wrong for me, and they're not doing what I want, and stuff like that, so then really I become my whole universe. That's miserable (732-736).*

During her drinking years Vicky felt like a victim and describes herself as someone who *blames other people and circumstances for the way they are, for their own unhappiness (872-874).*

This feeling of omnipotence and the 'I deserve', 'I need' attitude is also revealed as being paradoxical by the participants who simultaneously describe the fear and isolation that they

associated with their lives as active drinkers. Christopher offers an explanation for this apparent disconnect : *...because I 'm a person of extremes, so I go between those two and I don't have the balance, or a place of peace* (467-470) and later in his interview reflects that *It was an uncomfortability with self* (537).

Howard recognises that *when I was in my drinking days I was fairly stunted* whilst Brian discloses that *as an alcoholic I drank alone a lot* (327-328) and affirms; *I also drank because I was messed up, and I lived in fear of being socially awkward, I couldn't have relationships with people* (61-64). Frances remembers that *for years as a drinking alcoholic I would never have talked to anybody* (574-575) which she says is *very hard to bear and of course it makes your character, if you like, and the way you behave distorted* (579-581). In the same vein, Lena talks about an *awful low state, negative feeling about myself, about the planet, about other people, just a horrible discussion in my head, like a labyrinthine thing* (459-463).

Reaching rock bottom in AA terms is about being cognisant of the despair and destruction that drinking is causing in a person's life which is coupled with some level of resolve, however tenuous, to attempt to do something about it. For Christopher this was about *just getting to a point where you don't want to live. I wouldn't describe it anymore than getting to a place of despair* (505-508). Lena describes it in more revelatory terms: *I had a moment of truth or epiphany or whatever and I suddenly realised that the drink was in control of me and I wasn't in control of the drink* (237-240). In the same way the watershed moment in Frances's life seems to have been when she moved from a position of feeling that she wasn't an alcoholic but she just had a problem with drink to one day accepting that *you really are an alcoholic and you're going to have to do something about it* (179-181). Identifying in this way marked the beginning of her journey in sobriety, soon after she attended her first AA meeting.

### 4.3.2 The Sober Self

The participants in this study show a broad ranging appreciation of what constitutes sobriety in AA terms and in so doing provide some insight into how the AA journey, whilst always being primarily about not 'picking up' a drink, significantly broadens after drinking cessation into a new way of being. As shown in the following extract from Brian's interview, there is no automatic route to a sober way of living, AA membership does not deliver an identikit new life, it simply offers the opportunity to the individual to create one.

*At the beginning of sobriety it was so awful because there was nothing, it's not instant gratification, there's nothing that's going to be like, okay you've stopped drinking now, you feel good, it's something that you have to work towards, and it's something that builds (69-75).*

Frances picks up on this idea of the personal challenge of sobriety and although she links her sobriety with her 'step work' and attendance at AA meetings she clearly doesn't see all AA members as being sober or understanding sobriety in the same way: *Sometimes you know there are people...there are people who have not gotten sober really, you know there is a difference between stopping drinking and getting sober, leading a sober life (73-77).* Later in his interview, when talking about his uncle, Brian again refers to the difference between being dry and being sober and the need for personal effort:

*By successful sobriety I mean having some happiness in your life. Because you can quit drinking, alcoholics can quit drinking, and I know ... my uncle's a great example, he quit drinking but didn't work any program, and stayed miserable (587-592)*

So, for Brian and Francis AA membership is not enough, it is what they individually and uniquely make of their AA membership and their own journey in sobriety that is ultimately important. These participants are also implying that leading a 'sober life' is a personal and everyday challenge founded upon a more philosophically and spiritually based world view.

In referring to her sobriety Lena comments *that it's just an ongoing path and I hope that more will be revealed*. There is a quality of equating sobriety with her life's journey and an intimation that continual movement reaps rewards. In a similar vein some of the participants also regard their sobriety in very pragmatic terms: Lena comments, *well on a practical level I go to meetings. I think that helps maintain my sobriety* (471-473) and Vicky says *I am totally aware that I would not stay sober unless the AA programme was at the forefront of my mind* (262-264). Looking back, Frances reflects that *if I hadn't gone to AA and gotten sober I don't know where I'd be, maybe dead, maybe bonkers in a mental institution* (940-942). Just as she connects her problematic and excessive drinking with an outcome of death or insanity she similarly views her sobriety as a *very practical gift* (835); something that *gives you the ability to manage your life without getting uppity about it* (836-837). In very simple terms Brian remains mindful of the fact that *there's a lot of things I do to stay sober* (196).

In following this line of thought Vicky describes how being sober allows her to manage her life and to struggle through the bad times without acting out or 'picking up':

*Dad died horribly of cancer. I found out Hugo was cheating on me. I got pregnant, we had a fight, he didn't want the child, I had an abortion. What else? I was in the tsunami in Phuket and that was very frightening. So big, nasty things in Vicky's little world have happened to me, and I've been able to deal with them and not even think about drinking, or taking a drug, or taking it out inappropriately* (600-608).

Christopher equates his sobriety with the ability to engage with others authentically and not be governed by the herd. He explains;

*Being honest, it's about being honest. And that's why I think if I'm honest today then I won't need to drink, I won't need to drug, I won't need to shy away from what I need to do, no matter what others think of me* (984-989).



He also linked his sobriety with being able to be honest about his sexuality and comments; *I don't think I would ever have come out had I not got sober, which is a huge change* (932-934), whilst Frances describes it as allowing her to *forget about the impression you're making and just be there and be with everybody else* (529-531). Both Lena and Howard associate their sobriety with emotional and physical well being. Lena describes how *it's made me happier, and more relaxed, and given me more energy and made me healthier* (907-909) and Howard says *I remember lying on the boat, looking up to the underside of this bridge, and thinking I was going to be sober for the rest of my life. And I was really happy* (488-491).

Again using sparse language, Brian encapsulates the view amongst these long term sober participants in saying, *it's not just about staying sober anymore, and it's about staying sane* (208-209).

In summary this theme communicates the sense of profound and lasting change that the participants associate with moving from drunkenness to sobriety. There is a sense of potentiality returning to their lives as a direct consequence of their continued recovery from addiction following the AA framework. It is also worth noting that in these particular parts of the interviews the participants were recounting details of their alcoholic past and sober present which comes closest to the bearing witness format of AA meetings themselves.

#### **4.4 Superordinate Theme 4: Well Being**

This superordinate theme draws together the ways in which the participants' long term sobriety has contributed towards their sense of well being. Well being is not to be confused with happiness and feeling well as such, although this of course does often occur. Instead it is primarily meant to denote the importance that these participants now attach to doing this thing called being, well, based on a transformed understanding of what being here is all about. The

subordinate themes that make up this category are: The Courageous Self, The Free Self and The Centred Self.

#### **4.4.1 The Courageous Self**

In response to the question, what does the term personal courage mean to you? Vicky says *I think probably the bravest thing I've ever done was to go to my first AA meeting. And to me that's personal courage* (1181-1184). Francis concurs in explaining, *I think it takes personal courage to come to AA* (841-842) and addressing the same point Brian explains that *it took courage to do it, and it took more courage to continue. I'm really, really going to do this* (892-894). In the following extract Howard also clearly describes this crossroads that the participants feel they were facing at the moment of coming to AA and the personal fortitude that taking this step entails:

*I see it as being a courageous act.... because there were two roads I could have gone down. I could have gone down the AA road or I could have gone down the road of just drinking and having that lifestyle where you're selling yourself short, you're suffering by your drinking and drugging* (1121-1129).

The statements evidence how these long term sober participants associate personal courage with the ability to recognise and act upon something that they already knew inwardly but had previously pushed away and ignored.

Another key component of the courage that the participants refer to is the courage to face themselves as they are and in so doing end years of self deception. Francis acknowledges that *to recognise that you have a problem and that you are a fallible and flawed human being, that takes courage* (842-844). Christopher talks about the courage involved in *facing up to your demons. Facing up to everything you're scared of* (1028-1029) and Vicky regards it as *courageous to really examine your past* (1248) and *to actually say this is how I was wired even*

*before I drank (1252-1253).* Here, courage is connected with knowing weaknesses and imperfections as opposed to being identified as something that is solely associated with overt personal strength.

The courage to be self directed in situations of doubt and struggle is also highlighted as being important by the participants both in terms of staying sober and maintaining the ability *to face life on life's terms* (Brian 864). Christopher talks about the courage *to truly be yourself. And I'm not saying I know what that is, but I do know that there are certain fundamentals*, whilst Brian accepts that *there are uncomfortable times, there is, you know, there's lots of things that happen in life that aren't pleasant. But I have the courage to go through these times sober now*. Frances also affirms that, for her, it *takes courage sometimes to stay sober through very difficult occasions* (844-845).

In the extract below Lena alludes to the fact that being more resilient allows her to overcome stuckness based on fear and thereby engage more fully in her life. She says;

*That doesn't mean to say it can't be absolutely miserable and horrible. It's like the difference between a soap opera and a Greek tragedy. The Greek tragedy is going to have worse things happening in it probably, but it's going to be more glorious* (982-987).

Later in her interview Lena makes two statements that poignantly communicate her sense of everyday courage and how it relates directly to her personally even though it may be maintained and added to by her choice to remain connected to AA . She declares *you can kick me to death but you can't take my soul* (1110-1111) and *Freedom is a gift, which no one can take away* (1128-1129).

In exploring the concept of personal courage further Francis clarifies that *I've never thought, I must be courageous, carry on I just thought, you know, Christ, how am I going to get through ...? You know, and do the next thing* (918-921). There is a marked difference between

the slightly grandiose courage that she starts to describe which is imbued with a sense of direction and purpose and the type of courage that she actually identifies in herself which is more closely associated with quiet fortitude and the courage to carry on, despite fear and doubt because that's all she feels she can do or as she puts it *just getting through sometimes* (840). Brian also refers to the everydayness of courage in saying *I'm able to walk into situations that require courage. Or I'm able just to walk with courage* (869-870).

The participants' accounts additionally show that courage and fortitude is not limited to an inner focus or sense of solitariness, which would be reminiscent of the alcoholic self. Brian realises; *I think maybe I have courage that I'm not doing it alone* (866-867) and Christopher returns to the poem that he refers to at the beginning of his interview:

*I think it's... it is about having strength to call, to ask for. It is about having the strength to, as in that poem Love Dogs to continually cry 'Allah, Allah.' And it is about having that... yeah, it's about reaching* (580-585).

#### **4.4.2 The Free Self**

First and foremost, freedom in the long term sober AA member's life is regarded as freedom from addiction to alcohol and consequently there a sense of liberation and being set free. This freedom is experienced in contrast to the un-freedom of drinking. The following extract from Brian's interview comprehensively shows how feeling free to drink is actually not about freedom at all.

*Sobriety has given me so much freedom, because before my life was just, I was just, not a victim, but I was a victim of my circumstances maybe, like I had no freedom, like I couldn't do that job because I drank all the time, I couldn't have that relationship because I was drunk all the time, I couldn't, you know there was no freedom, I was a prisoner, alcoholism just held me*

*prisoner. And sobriety has given me so much freedom, because the only thing that's ever going to hold me back now is me. And that feels very good (735-746).*

Christopher regards this freedom of sobriety as being enhanced rather than curtailed by AA publications: *I think that the literature remains the same, and at least within the big book and other bits of AA literature there's nothing desperately controversial in terms of pinning you down (822-826).* In relation to AA itself, Frances similarly identifies the freedom to self actualise and to self define as being of primary importance. Rather than seeing AA as a being made up of a narrow set of rules designed to lead people down one predetermined path, she explains that *people have to be allowed to find their own way. That's why I like AA because it is a broad church (49-150).* Howard communicates a sense of exhilaration when thinking about the freedom to be an individual that he sees as part of the AA experience:

*You go to AA meetings and you hear all different people's experiences, so they all have a different take on it. And you'll have a different take on it, and what's fantastic is, the healthy way that I see is, you live and let live (790-795).*

For these participants, sobriety has also led her to a greater understanding of being itself, with all its limitations and possibilities. This awareness goes hand in hand with an ability to bear the knowledge of their own freedom and harness that knowledge in a way that challenges them to make decisions and take action; to live as freely as possible from day to day. Howard refers to the freedom *to create your own path (654)* and goes on to explain, *I've got the freedom to embark on my life, to do the things that I've wanted to do (947-949).* Lena says *I've got my own big picture; my own agenda that I want to follow (403-404)* and since becoming sober sees life as *just such a big adventure and exciting (966-967).* In turn Brian uses the same word to convey this freedom to explore and describes how *life to me is now more of an adventure (833-834).*

The freedom to 'do' is also accompanied by the freedom to 'view' - things differently. Francis describes it as *a sense of freedom* (916) and doesn't only see it as being about change. She believes that *if you can change things then change things and if you can't, find a way of living it* (898-899). So, for Frances, the freedom to alter her perspective and to adapt to an existing situation is sometimes as important as being able to change it all together: She confirms this when saying that *sometimes you can choose to be miserable or you can choose not to be* (895-896). A consciousness of agency, which is both psychological and behavioural, is also important to Vicky who describes how her sobriety *gets rid of this complete self-obsession, this self-absorption going down endless blind alleys through misperceptions and dishonest, fuzzy thinking* (1010-1013). Howard builds on this idea of clear thinking when he says; *I think what's happened to me, what has really, really helped me, is that thing of, I can actually tell you today what I want, where for years I didn't* (647-650). When talking about how she deals with a difficult boss now she is sober, Frances uses an interesting metaphor to highlight this point about mental freedom. She asks rhetorically, *would you rent a room to somebody you can't stand who's annoying? No you wouldn't, so why give space in your head to that person?* (589-592).

Freedom for Vicky is also about being able to let go. This is not the same as having no care; rather it is about doing what you can, not trying to control everything and living more in the moment by acting rather than prevaricating. She describes it thus; *I believe that if you do it you should be able to take, not risk, but you should be able to fall in love and reckon the deep and if it goes wrong you'll be able to cope* (775-778). Francis shares the same perspective when she explains; *Yeah make the plans and let go. That's the thing. If you can do that, if I can do that, I lead a much easier life* (282-284). By changing her sentence from the general to the particular; the 'you' to the 'I', Frances discloses how personally she views this challenge and

later on in the interview reiterates this point in saying *What I find the best way to say it is not that I'm in control but that my life is more manageable* (818-820).

In addition, the ability to be yourself and accept yourself, in the world with others, is seen as being a fundamental aspect of the freedom offered by sobriety for these participants. Christopher defines it as *coming to an acceptance of self* (559-560) and expresses relief that *there's no need anymore to try and be something for others, try and be just some other... whatever I thought that would be more comfortable* (1087-1090). Brian declares that *personal freedom is the freedom to be me. But it's not just the freedom to be me; it's that I feel okay with who I am* (721-723). This freedom to be yourself is always a work in progress which is acknowledged by Lena when she concludes *I have to remind myself that I'm free, a lot* (1025-1025).

#### **4.4.3 The Centred Self**

The ability to relate to others authentically and confidently is often referred to by the participants as being built on a feeling of inner validation and affirmation. In the following extract Christopher differentiates this feeling of centeredness from being closed off or too sure:

*I don't think I'm surer of myself, I think I'm... I'm always willing to ask now about what I believe, and to reform my opinion, which is good, but if something is... if I made a decision on something having taken advice, and I think that's the right decision, I don't back down just because of fear of what another person will think or want.*

By referring to the 'right decision' Christopher is implying that it is the right thing for him to do, which is not necessarily the right thing for others. He affirms this sense of personal truth when he goes on to say, *there's a thing on the back of the coin, 'To thine own self be true.'* *Shakespeare's quote, and yeah, it is about that* (992-995). Howard gives further voice to this view: *Another thing that I've realised is we're all so uniquely different, where what might be*

*good for me might not be good for you, and vice versa* (156-159). Lena concurs in saying *I believe that we're all created, or I'm created as this unique individual* (377-379) and Vicky understands that *no one in recovery is the same, and that's why everybody hears something different in the chair* (1159-1161).

Brian uses a more visceral tone to convey his experience of being centred which seems synonymous with finding the centre of himself:

*It's about getting down those layers, seeing through your ego, seeing through your wants, and all that stuff, and just getting to the core, and it's like this little voice in there, that's like you've got whatever it is that will guide you* (658-663).

Lena also locates her sense of self validation within the physical centre of her body; *it's the little voice inside* (1257) and goes on to use more physical imagery to describe her ability to protect her thoughts and feelings as a consequence of her sobriety: *I feel like it's mine [her mind] ... and I feel like I could hermetically seal it, and I certainly wouldn't have felt that before* (1100-1103). This ability to protect her mind from being swamped by the opinions and suggestions of others was something that Lena felt might be compromised by joining AA. Her actual, as opposed to supposed experience was in fact the very opposite, i.e. it enabled her to come to her-self: *That's exactly the fear, when I came in, that I would lose myself, but it's just like polishing up a dirty diamond in fact, you just get rid of the stuff that's been imposed on you* (1142-1147). Frances associates this feeling of inner centeredness as being both comforting and empowering; *it's about being able to live a normal quiet life and dealing with difficulties as and when they arise* (861-863). The use of the words 'normal' and 'quiet' in the context of dealing with problems as and when they arise convey a quality of less anxiety, mental fermentation and self doubt as opposed to being a statement about conformity and stillness. This is clarified further when she says, in answer to the question how has surrendering to the



Higher Power changed the way you see yourself, *I've less of a chip on the shoulder and more relaxed about life.... more at ease* (810-812).

Letting go of a preoccupation with *what other people think of you* (253) has also been an important part of these participants' journeys in recovery. During her interview Frances recounts a recent incident at work where, despite feeling she had done the right thing, others could have easily misunderstood her intentions. She concludes that *it doesn't matter what they think of me, it doesn't matter* (257-258). Rather than revealing a complete rejection of others and their views, this statement is about Frances's acceptance that you can't please everybody all the time and the attempt to do so should not be the final arbiter of what she says and how she acts. This feeling of inner balance and wholeness is picked up by Howard when he says, *when you start operating from the right place, in the right way, it's something that feels right to you* (152-155). Here again, there is a sense of Howard being centred from within, which allows him to transition into different environments and contexts without losing a sense of who he is and thus running the risk of becoming the person that others might like him to be.

In summary this theme has captured a sense of how the participants have changed their orientation towards their lives in ways that are positive and beneficial to their everyday lived experience; a thrust towards being—well-in-the-world. In essence this ability to 'face life on life's terms', whilst being predicated on not drinking, has come about by first coming to know and then starting to act from a place which communicates an understanding of what these 'terms' actually are.

## **4.5 Superordinate Theme 5: Understanding Being**

This superordinate theme encapsulates the aspects of the participant's accounts that reveal a greater understanding of both the confines and necessities of their own being. Contemplation of these givens and the consequent challenges that being alive presents to all individuals as

well as to them uniquely, allows the participants to better understand the human world and their place within it. The subordinate themes that make up this category are: The Limited Self and the Surrendered Self.

#### **4.5.1 The Limited Self**

Understanding one's limitations is seen by the participants as being intimately linked to their sobriety and being about maintaining a realistic view of themselves, the frontiers of humanity and their power to influence others. Christopher asks, *and how can you fix it. There are some things that are just unfixable. And one of them is your humanity.* Frances associates *accepting one's own limitations* (729) with emotional health and well being and has come to understand that *to try and make something happen that cannot happen is deeply misery-making* (910-912). Christopher describes how he reminds himself to *come back to today because you have no control over this and what is it that you want to control? You're trying to wrest control out of a situation that you've got no control over whatsoever* (407-412).

Brian goes even further in describing the physical and emotional consequences of attempting to be omnipotent.

*I'm the type of person that can get very anxious and if I am out there controlling everything or trying to just manipulate everything and worry about everything, I'll be in the hospital, because my body just can't deal with what that does to me* (109-114).

The above and the below extracts show, that for Brian, reigning in and understanding personal limits is not in fact about less contentment or worse still distress, but is more about preserving health by choosing when and when not to expend emotional and physical energy on something.

*I can't keep fighting my boss, you know, as an example. I can't keep fighting a rule that I don't like, like there are things I can get to pick my battles, there's things worth it, and you know, I'll definitely get up there with the best of them and fight if I deem it necessary. But there are battles where I am not going to win, and is it worth my happiness? No (806-813).*

Similarly Vicky now recognises that *the better self is the person who acknowledges that I am not the centre of the universe, that the world doesn't revolve around me (158-161) and that there is something bigger and that my little world needs to slot back into the jigsaw puzzle and it's not the frame of the picture, it's just a small part (575-578).*

The concept of framing ones life within something bigger also impacts upon Howard who values *the understanding that there is a lot that is greater than me* and says *if I don't have that sense, then I feel what is it all about? (235-237)*. Rather than being limiting therefore, an understanding of fitting into something bigger actually allows Howard to find individual meaning and hence grow as a person. Christopher appreciates the 'huge' importance of being able to access this same feeling: *But if I swim out far enough I then start to get a little panicky in the water. And I think of the water and I think of how much bigger it is than me. That in itself, it's huge (769-773)*. Lena uses a literature to communicate the same understanding: *...and Dickens wrote about it... he said the magnificence of these big buildings made you realise how small you were (712-718).*

An acceptance that there is something bigger is not limited to natural and man made structures and, for the participants, is also about appreciating that there is a greater energy or what, through AA, they have come to regard as a Higher Power. Howard explains that *I cannot live my life on this planet today without a Higher Power. I need to have something bigger than me (229-232)* and later in his interview refers to the inter-relationship between himself and his Higher Power: *I'm taking care of myself, but I feel as if there's a power bigger than me looking*

*after me* (751-753). Brian illuminates this point further and links it with the ability to cope with major events in life, whilst staying sober:

*I just believe that everybody should come in and find a connection to something bigger than themselves, and that's really going to enable a successful sobriety, because life happens, death happens, friendships break up, people lose their jobs* (596-601).

For Francis, an awareness of her inability to control everything is coupled with a proportional sense of self doubt and a lack of self sufficiency, which she emphasises by exclaiming *I don't know everything, I don't understand everything*. (83-84). This sentiment allows Frances to appreciate that the corollary of limitedness in the relational realm is an understanding of a healthy dependence on others and she therefore puts great store in the ability *to seek help, always to look for help, because that's the point* (573-575). In a similar vein Christopher concludes that reaching out to others *holds a strength that I don't have on my own* (96-97).

These statements become even more meaningful when they are further contextualised: For these participants the many years of being drinking alcoholics were characterised by an unshakeable belief that they knew what was best for themselves and indeed for everybody else and a firm commitment to go it alone, not needing anything from others. Letting go of this sureness and sense of self sufficiency has clearly been important to Lena who says *I think that I used to assume more knowledge than I do now* and Frances who recognises, with a palpable feeling of relief, *a sense of pride has to go out that I can manage on my own thank you very much. I can't!* (796-798).

#### **4.5.2 The Surrendered Self**

The nexus of the AA message lies in the idea of self surrender. The normal use of this word conjures up images of defeat, dejectedness and despair. The participants in this study

however give voice to a very different idea of what surrender can be about and communicate a clear sense of prevailing and overcoming.

Howard explains: *You surrender to the fact that you don't want to have the obsession for alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, whatever* (1008-1011) and that he is *surrendering the compulsion, surrendering the desire* (1022-1023). Christopher also associates the idea of surrendering with cessation of the futile struggle to control his alcohol intake. He says, *so you have to eventually lay down your arms. You have to stop fighting* (383-384). In the extract below Brian also uses the same analogy of ending the fight:

*I had the same sensation from surrendering. The exact same sensation, oh, the fight is over, and it felt so, so good; the years of battling. And now it's something different in my life, like there's certain things I'm not fighting anymore* (800-805).

Lena employs the imagery of escaping disaster and hence being saved to convey the good sense of surrendering and not fighting on: *It sometimes feels like... well, it's like jumping out of the burning building, that would be the best example of totally handing yourself over to the Higher Power* (1401-1404). Frances invokes an image of self harm when she compares the struggle to give up drinking without AA *to keep banging my head against a brick wall* (909-910) and also describes it as *a waste of one's own resources....one's own mental and spiritual energies* (587-588).

During her interview Vicky makes an important distinction between surrendering to alcohol and surrendering to otherness and shows a clarity of thought that challenges the idea that overt surrender is less healthy than living a life that, in actuality, is out of control. She recognises that *I'd been handing over to the wrong things for years* (254-255), thus dispelling the idea that being able to drink was liberating at all. She goes on; *I wanted to surrender to*

*somebody. I knew I was surrendering to something that was killing me which was drink (1267-1270).*

With an element of sarcasm Vicky also alludes to a life of struggle and subjugation that accompanied her drinking:

*The idea of handing over my will and my life to a benign power, who wouldn't expect very much in return if you see what I mean, wouldn't have to sleep with it or cook its meals or whatever, was actually enormously attractive (230-234).*

Brian clarifies this point further when he says *the one word I associate with surrender is peace (824-825)* and in the following extract similarly equates surrendering in AA terms with quite literally the freedom to breathe:

*And so surrendering came when I was at the jumping off point, and surrendering has turned out to be the biggest, because it was like this [breathes deeply], funnily enough it was like the first deep breath I had since I started drinking*

The participants also talk about how the concept of surrendering, initially to the desire not to drink has permeated into other aspects of their lives as their sobriety has developed. Frances affirms that *it is a daily thing really. If you can let go of a situation and let everybody else look after themselves (198-200)*. Lena describes how surrendering is about having *the think, think, think, sign upside down (626-627)* which allows her to *turn my brain off and see what's going to happen (1158-1160)*. Frances views this reality as a *complete paradox, you let go and then sometimes things just happen (134-135)*.

Brian further explores the outcome of knowing when to switch off when he comments: *It's really interesting isn't it? I've never had such a life. Like I really have a wonderful full life now, and wherein, I exactly got that from handing it over (917-920)*.

In the extract below Howard is similarly pondering the effect of surrendering and notices:

*It's actually made me a stronger guy. It's funny actually because you surrender to something and you think you're going to give all your... you're going to become passive, and they're going to be in control. And it's actually the other way about. You surrender but you end up being in control of your life (1031-1038).*

Lena locates herself within the self surrender/self empowerment paradigm when she asserts that *letting go is when we suddenly get that wisdom (1186-1187)*, whilst Frances concludes that the *shortest prayer is just help, let go (233-234)*.

In summary this theme has evidenced how the participants have come to appreciate that being-successfully is sometimes less about knowing what you are and more about understanding what you are not. The realisation of essential human limitations and the discovery of how empowering it can be to know when to let go and reach out emerges as perhaps the most cherished aspect of their long term sobriety.

## **Chapter 5      Discussion**

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The purpose of this study was to first gather and then analyse the lived experience of long term sobriety as expressed by a group of participants, at this given moment in their lives, who still identified as AA members and were enthusiastic proponents of its core teachings. The aim of the research was to leave behind the range of societal views concerning what success in AA must be about, often characterised by feelings of suspicion and doubt and a concern that the individual may be captured and swallowed up in the group-think, in favour of hearing the voices of people who have remained within the programme over a long period.

Considering the clarity of its stated objectives, a plethora of programme literature and clear meeting structure it is difficult to understand how there has come to be such widely differing opinions concerning what AA is and more precisely, why it works and how it works. One of the reasons for this lack of agreement is that commentators and clinicians will often attempt to understand AA from their own theoretical standpoint, find it doesn't fit and work backwards from there. There is also a lack of appreciation of the fundamentally personal and spiritual nature of AA and a resultant frustration with not being able to easily encapsulate or operationalize how it should work for all its members. It could therefore be said that in line with the seminal 1980's book 'listening to Prozac' it is only really possible to learn more about what AA 'is' or the range of what it can be by talking to the people who take the 'medicine', not by assessing its structural makeup. In other words AA 'is' how it impacts upon each individual member. In all circumstances however, the central measure of success in AA lies in the ability of the individual member to maintain total abstinence from alcohol intake in the long term. Despite this imperative, the long term sober section of the AA population has traditionally been underrepresented as the subjects of investigation, both in quantitative and qualitative research.



The results analysis has demonstrated that sobriety is about much more than not drinking for these individuals and in fact constitutes a new way of living informed by a hard fought and deeply personal reorientation towards being itself. This reorientation can be characterised as the individual developing the ability to live at the precarious juncture between limitation and possibility and thus to continually stake out new territory, both imagined and real in their lives both within and outside AA; imagined, because it starts with an ability to change perspective, a self given gift that sets us free and opens to the possible, and real because it is enacted, done or not done, brought alive in our actual choices and resultant actions. The participants in this study seem to appreciate that there is a shelf life to understandings that remain unlived and their accounts communicate a vibrancy and potency towards living that translates into a personal renaissance based upon the spiritual and philosophical precepts of the AA programme. These ideas are rooted in the acceptance of the need to individually struggle through existence, and to develop a personal understanding of the nature of being, the contemplation of which seems to allow these participants to better appreciate what is really on offer on the journey from birth to death.

## **5.1 AA and the revival of the self**

The concept of self hood is at once the shiny cup and poisoned chalice of humanity. In one sense it is the sum of all we know and all we see and as such it is a construct that can connect us with the potentiality that being itself offers and in another it is a heavy anchor that can prevent us from expanding our horizons and setting sail towards the future. We are required to create our-selves, find our-selves and forget our-selves in all we do and to thereby accept that the self is nothing and everything at the same time. In all cases in this study the participants identified a journey towards themselves, which in turn re-orientated their relations with others and otherness, as being a key facet of their new lives achieved through their long term

association with AA. These observations of the self resonate with the existential philosophical tradition where the self is viewed as being more about experience than essence. Both Heidegger (1927/1962) and Sartre (1943/1956) rejected the notion of any solid self with the former believing that there is no self, only being-in-the-world, a process of connecting to the world that we are 'thrown' into and the latter feeling that the self is artificially generated and had been confused with the pure intentionality of the human condition (van Deurzen 1998). These ideas run contrary to the more traditional psychoanalytic view as expressed by writers such as Freud (1923) and Klein (1937) and the more humanistic views of Berne (1972) where mature selfhood is defined as a capability to master instinctual drives and thereby attain a more solid or mature sense of self (van Deurzen-Smith 1997).

The different participant accounts in this research highlight the fact that how each individual relates to the concept of their own selfhood is ultimately significant and more specifically where they perceive the levers of control to be in coming to terms with who they are, who they have been and who they want to become. This involves protecting the sanctity of ones own perception of reality in any given moment on the one hand, whilst remaining aware that self deception can be painful and destructive on the other. As van Deurzen (2005) suggests, the self might best be described as the dynamic and ever-changing experience of being at the narrative centre of gravity of ones particular world experience. Similarly, Sartre's (1943/1956) assertion that 'existence precedes essence' also allows for a more fluid self concept and infers something constant about the challenge of simultaneously being and becoming a self that these participants now seem to accept.

The self therefore is never complete but is and should be multi faceted, containing different surfaces and having different levels and it is therefore in the capacity of self that we can speak of the real self or of there being a self. As such, the self is always moving between different contexts and the imperative of being becomes to engage authentically with self and others,

time after time. It is a lack of authentic engagement with the world that has driven most of the participants to self destructive drinking and their accounts show that an ability to self validate and be true to self in dealing with others now anchors their new way of being. As Cohn (2002) observes, it is the constancy and givenness of this challenge that leads Heidegger to regard authenticity as a way of being-in-the-world as opposed to being about a separate authentic self as such. Heidegger's (1927/1962) notion of Dasein, or 'being there' is intimately connected to 'being-with', Mitsein (Heidegger 1927/1962 p114) and as such the person is never just a subject on his or her own (Cohn 2002). For these participants sobriety has entailed a purposeful re-engagement with the world after many years of isolation and chronic inwardness. This has translated into becoming members of a group, recognising that it is their responsibility to keep in touch with people, both in AA and other areas of their lives, and accepting that they cannot survive in the world alone, they cannot give up drinking alone - they need others.

## **5.2 Trusting in self, being-with-others**

For many of the participants, their journey in sobriety has also been characterised by an acknowledgment of the need not to take on other people's opinions or judgements as their own truth, whether they be other AA members, work colleagues, family or friends. This has required them to appreciate that in addition to the need to relate, is the need to maintain a sense of their own agency and individuality through inner contemplation of life's situations and challenges. This becomes all the more difficult when taking into account the Buberian perspective which affirms that the self only really exists in relation to the other, and as van Deurzen (2005) clarifies, for Buber there is never purely an 'I' on its own. There is only ever the 'I' of the 'I-Thou' or the 'I' of the 'I-It'. During their interviews a number of the participants refer to understanding how important it has been for them to remind themselves that what

others think of them is often not within their control and therefore doesn't really matter and certainly should not dictate their thoughts and feelings. Hence, just as these participants can only truly find themselves in the world of others they also realise that they are in constant danger of losing their sense of self in the relational dimension where, without an everyday courageous dedication to plot their own course (Medina 2008b), they would be reduced to becoming the Heideggerian (1927/1962) 'they-self' or 'Das Man' as distinct from an authentic real self. As drinking alcoholics these participants were often defined by others in a much as they let others define their reality which they then attempted to escape from by resorting to heavy drinking.

The concept of selfhood therefore and how it can relate to both stuckness and change and despair and hope is very present in the participants' accounts of their experience of recovery from alcoholism and the results of this research point towards a deeper and more complex understanding of the different facets of the sober self. These facets reveal one of the central paradoxes of being and self hood, namely that cutting off from life is no solution to dealing with its misfortunes yet immersing oneself in the flow of life inevitably brings the possibility of suffering as well as enjoyment (van Deurzen 1998). The movement between individuation and participation is in some respects the central challenge of the self or the 'I' in any given moment and these participants are united by a new found determination to engage in this contextual dilemma as opposed to hide away and drink. This involves accepting the challenge of life, the need to struggle, and to always remember, that almost everything was more difficult when they were drinking. In other words, being here carries on challenging these individuals to engage with life on life's terms, involving both a form of surrender and a heightened sense of personal responsibility which in their sobriety, has become the new dynamic in their everyday living.

### **5.3 Recovery and the existential attitude**

The experience of long term sobriety for these participants has thus been about an increased openness to being-with-others as opposed to simply existing alongside others, something that characterised their lives as active alcoholics; always and inevitably connected, but at the mercy of the connection as opposed to being able to be the beneficiary of connectedness. They have therefore come to recognise that whilst this participation cannot be “annulled” (Mills 1997, p46) it can most certainly be “honed” (van Deurzen-Smith 1997, p37). Tillich identifies the courage to participate “with the whole of ones existence” (1952:124) as being the key to the existential attitude and Spinelli 1989 refers to the “I and ‘not I’” (p26) in the relationship between self and others and explains that “I can only know who I am by comparing some assumed aspect of myself to that which I have interpreted as existing in others” (p26). As a direct result of following the teachings of AA these participants are now able to reflect on the quality of their relatedness towards, as opposed to the extent of their isolation from others and crucially, to plot how different ways of being with others directly impacts upon their own sense of well being. This attitude also resonates with Foucault’s (2005) belief that the ethical subject is constituted with and through others and that care of the self is not practised in isolation. The participants accounts also affirm an appreciation of similarity and difference and contrary to what might be assumed, an ability to be with other AA members and draw on their experiences without becoming lost or overtaken by the ‘crowd’ (Kierkegaard 1844) or the ‘herd’ (Nietzsche 1882/1974). The imperative that these participants would appear to have ingested from their AA membership is to find their own way and let others find theirs. In so doing, they are left with the responsibility to choose mindfully and have the fortitude and insight to remain constantly embroiled in the struggle between daring to amplify their inner thoughts or being directed by the external cacophony of seemingly solid imperatives that

populate so much of the social world and that in the past, had caused many of them to retreat into excessive drinking.

Looked at in this light, these results directly challenge the views and assumptions of those, often in the psychological/psychotherapeutic realm, who believe that AA “de-emphasises individuality, separation and self sufficiency” (Kemp 2011, p12). Miller and Kurtz (1994) react with deep suspicion to these types of viewpoints and suggest that perhaps more than any other reality born in modern times, Alcoholics Anonymous has become, “the proverbial elephant described by unsighted examiners” (p165). The reality of long term sobriety for these participants, who all identify as recovering alcoholics and are thus able to see the whole of the elephant, so to speak, is specifically contrary to Kemp’s (2011) view. They have all followed the AA programme for many years, articulate a willingness to take personal responsibility and thus experience a feeling of personal empowerment that is derived from a greater appreciation of when it is appropriate to participate, when it is necessary to individuate, when it is right to take control and when it is worthwhile to let go.

The AA slogan, ‘I had to change, the same person would drink again’, points towards the difference between merely being able to stop drinking and actually becoming sober. In line with this thinking these research results show that although recovery has been initiated by ceasing to use alcohol, over the long term it has become far more about working on the whole self, accepting oneself, taking action, taking no action, and coming to understand what authentic engagement is about in the world-with-others. More than any other psychotherapeutic modality, these outcomes have a synergy and resonance with the fundamental concerns of existential therapy. Here, the client is helped to gain clarity about the nature of being and find their purpose within it, to learn to face life’s inevitable difficulties with confidence and resilience (van Deurzen 2002) and is encouraged to promote the emergence of a more authentic way of living (Cohn 2002) and to embrace life’s limitations and possibilities

in the search for personal meaning (Strasser and Strasser 1997). The results of this study also convey a clear understanding on the part of these participants that AA does not in itself contain the antidote to life's difficulties and setbacks but rather presents a practical and spiritual environment within which the inevitable struggles in life can be better understood and engaged with and the dynamics of being can be deconstructed and then reconstructed in a way that allows a new and unique direction in life to open up. Similarly, and as van Deurzen (1988) comments, "existential counselling aims at enabling clients to abandon false hopes of a smooth and perfect life" and therefore "the existential counsellor does not promise a nirvana of accomplishment" (in Strasser and Strasser 1997, p54), but instead provides a framework within which the individual can take "a sober look at the basic structure and dynamics of existence itself" (van Deurzen 2002, p23).

## **5.4 The freedom to be limited**

This study also raises the question, who gets to define what 'recovery' from alcoholism actually entails, the sufferer or the onlooker, especially when the onlooker is 'professionally qualified' with 'many years experience'? This research is predicated on the same assumption as other IPA studies in the area of recovery from addiction including Laudet 2007 and Shinebourne and Smith 2010, namely that "the important yet neglected question is what does recovery mean to persons engaged in that process?" (Laudet 2008, p203). The labels that are often associated with AA have traditionally seemed antithetic to the thrust of the existential psychotherapeutic tradition, which, for good reason in many instances, encourages clients to overcome the limitations that certain labels can confer upon them and re discover the ability to self define and self actualise. The tentative forethoughts behind this research included the idea that it may in fact be the case that despite the labels and group-think of AA, the actual lived experience of its members could be far more existential (i.e. infused with potency,

potentiality and personal responsibility) than has previously been assumed. It is also true that clients engaging in existential therapy are encouraged to manage the paradoxes of life in a creative and dynamic fashion (van Deurzen 2002). Accordingly these research results show that the freedom to label and the freedom that comes from labelling in the sphere of recovery from addiction is not only of central importance to recovery maintenance but also discloses the paradoxical nature of much of the AA language, the most important of which is to always identify as a recovering alcoholic so as never to be an active alcoholic again. Clarification of meaning is central to the existential tradition (Du Plock and Fisher 2005) and it is therefore not the label as such but the meaning that the individual attaches to the label that is of central importance. Van Deurzen (2002) also comments that “freedom is only initiated once boundaries have been explored” (p18).

Whilst this research provides rich and detailed data as to the different meanings that the participants attach to their self labelled status as alcoholics it is also possible to discern some key factors that unite their voices. These similarities include a feeling of freedom, a sense of ontological safety, the overcoming of self delusion, a cognisance of personal limits and most importantly an understanding that the central concern in identifying as an alcoholic is to take responsibility for deciding what type of alcoholic one wants be. These participants have therefore allowed us to see how they have come to terms with living as recovering alcoholics without either being swallowed up or disempowered by this categorisation. In other words the label alcoholic does not appear to define these participants, instead it provides a platform upon which each individual, despite uncertainty and doubt, can meaningfully and authentically engage in the personal challenge of being-here (see Medina 2008a for more on the argument concerning the congruence of labelling and existential thought).

Whatever the imagined loss of freedom that others may observe therefore, there is a clear sense in which these long term sober participants have subsumed their absolute freedom to



forget themselves and the pain of their past in favour of a more pragmatic acceptance of the real dangers that starting to 'drink responsibly' would entail. In so doing they have exercised their right to self define as alcoholics and rejected their status as outsiders in the societal groups that, in the past, they felt they should be part of or should fit into. Instead they have consciously and purposefully engaged in a group which offers a more personally nourishing experience, provides a secure base (Bowlby 1969), promotes secure attachment (Ainsworth 1978) and is essentially concerned with handing back the responsibility for everyday living to each of its members.

## **5.5      Courage and the strength to surrender**

This project has focussed on six people's experience of long term sobriety. As well as being both rich and deeply personal, their accounts contain much of their own philosophy of being, or world view and portrays their own understanding of what they feel they have given over and what they have got back as a result of committing to AA in the long term. It is with this in mind that the idea of self surrender and self empowerment embedded in the framework of Alcoholics Anonymous can be best understood. The question as to whether the deciding factor in a person's success in stopping drinking is this framework itself or how each individual makes sense of or experiences it, is of central importance to this research. This question is also the concern of many new members of AA, who have often reached a point of utter personal devastation through what feels like their uncontrollable use of alcohol. They despair of themselves, surrender themselves, whilst at the same time being left in no doubt that it is only through developing new facets of their-selves that they can bring about lasting change. These different facets of the self, or different selves, have much to do with an appreciation of environment and context externally and contemplation of the nature of being and centeredness internally. This letting go of self and simultaneously coming to oneself is strongly

evident in the life experience that the research participants share during their interviews. Accepting personal responsibility in the act of handing themselves over to their own Higher Power is akin to Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' (1980), as it equates to a renewed faith in themselves and their own capacities. Miller and Kurtz (1994) argue that even a cursory examination of the 12 steps reveals AA's sense of the alcoholic's responsibility to act and despite the fact that it is described as more of a 'god help' than self help programme, "it is the alcoholic that must take the initiative for recovery, who must by choice become willing" (p163). For these participants, this leap or surrender was to understand that they were not in control of all of their existence and neither should they be but at the same time as Spinelli (1989) says, they were not passive pawns in the purposeful plans of something else, be it supernatural or physical. Consequently, feeling truly free has only been achieved through understanding the limitations to that freedom particularly around their ability to drink responsibly. Kurtz (1982) views the concept of human finitude and essential limitation as the presence of the 'not' in the very being of any human individual and describes this as the first existential insight. When the individual identifies as an alcoholic, Kurtz (1982) views this as an act of acceptance of human finitude that allows them to discern the existential meaning of nothingness and become aware of the reality that some absolute limitation has become absolutely inevitable. Foucault (1988) suggests that self care "represents a network of obligations and services to the soul" (p27) which also "involves the most accurate measure of the place one occupies in the world and the system of necessities in which one is inserted" (2005, p538). As Shinebourne and Smith (2010) contend, in their own study on long term recovery from addiction, this system of necessities involves the "limits imposed by the constraints of one's own life" (p10) and the results of this current study shed further light on the unique and dynamic assessment of possibility and prohibition that defines freedom for individuals who achieve long term abstinence from alcohol consumption through their association with AA.

There is a clear sense of constancy and everydayness to the participants understanding of the personal challenge of sobriety, which has clear parallels with the existential formulation of everyday courage (Medina 2008b). This concept enables us to continue to consider courage as an important virtue, if not the most important virtue, but whereas throughout most of history it was located on the battlefield with its main protagonists as soldiers and warriors (Medina 2008b), we are now able to see it as more applicable to the “battlefields of everyday life” (Haitch 1995, p83) where courageous acts are required by us all. Digging deeper into this idea both from an existential and AA point of view is to appreciate that this encapsulation of courageousness is about quiet fortitude and most definitely not about an inflated ego or sense of faux emboldenment. May says that the “dialectic relationship between conviction and doubt is characteristic of the highest type of courage” (1976, p20) and it is in this respect that the success of the individual in achieving and maintaining sobriety can be most usefully discerned. Cunningham paraphrases Descartes when he says that to ‘create is to be’ (2007) which in the most basic sense entails having the courage to be ourselves and create ourselves as we project into the future. This ability to create is intimately linked to the ability to choose as it is through our choices that we are defined in any given moment. For Kierkegaard the mere fact that we are able to choose “makes man greater than the angels” (1992, p490) and indeed the qualitative leaps in Kierkegaard’s thought relate to the everyday courage to make fundamental choices, firstly between ethical and aesthetic ways of being or vice versa and secondly, between ethical ways of being and personal religious faith. For Kierkegaard, to know but not to act constitutes the ultimate despair, “the ethical is not merely a knowing; it is also a doing... to risk is something which cannot be taught but springs from the will of the individual” (1992, p155). All the participants refer to having more choices in their lives since becoming sober and relate this to the choice to change their circumstances as well as the choice to change their perspective in situations where they are not able to affect the outcome. They appear to have

experienced the transforming effects of re-connecting with their ultimate power to choose and in so doing, through their sobriety, have been able reclaim much of their life back into the realm of choice and away from the false 'facticity' (Sartre 1943/1956) of sedimented beliefs about themselves and others. This essentially existential formulation and central aim of existential psychotherapy is echoed in the serenity prayer of AA where a person asks to be given "the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference" (AA, 1976). As Kierkegaard affirms, "if one postpones the choice the personality makes the choice unconsciously or it is made by the dark powers within" (1992). For many of these participants, when they could postpone that choice no longer they started to attend AA meetings.

Through an acceptance of their own limitedness, separateness and connectedness these participants find the 'courage to be' (Tillich 1952). The 'to be' here specifically refers to their decision to take responsibility for creating meaning in their own lives and as Frankl (1963) suggests, give up the expectation that life would in some way deliver ready-made meaning for them. The experience of living in this way over their many years of sobriety has not in any sense meant that life has been without struggle, loss and sometimes despair for any of these participants, but what it has done is signalled their intention to learn to struggle through life and not to give up or to give in to drink. This commitment is in line with May's (1976) formulation, who, when commenting on the work of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus, asserts that personal resilience is not the absence of despair; it is, rather, the capacity to move ahead despite despair.

The need to face the future whilst being mindful of the past, always from the present, is evident in many of the participant's AA life stories. This narrative and temporal reality is an important part of their self image and is something that the AA framework positively engenders through encouraging their members to repeatedly tell their life stories and thereby own their

past whilst living in the moment and taking responsibility for their future. In his work on the structural aspects of experience, Minkowsky (1933) understood the significance of time stagnating and of being absorbed by the past, both of which resonate with many of the participants' understanding of their alcoholic selves. They consider a positive dealing with the past to be about recognition of what had gone wrong and a positive preparation for the future to be about an optimistic and realistic plan of action. Thus, time becomes about reflection and responsibility where the act of planning the future both harnesses freedom and is freedom for these participants.

This acceptance of the past has double meaning for the individuals involved in this study as it often includes accepting that they had been abusing alcohol for many years as well as acknowledging that they had thus far been unable to control their drinking by themselves. This resonates with Nietzsche's (1908) use of the term *amor fati*, loosely translating to love of one's fate, to describe an attitude in which one sees everything that happens in one's life, including suffering and loss, as good. He saw this as the "formula for greatness in a human being" (Nietzsche 1990, p258) and also part of our "inmost nature" (ibid p325). Moreover, *amor fati* is characterized by an acceptance of the events or situations that occur in one's life with the resultant necessity for a person to review their entire attitude to life, the world and the self and accept their experience in order to gain their individual grip on life (van Deurzen-Smith 1997). This type of fundamental reassessment of one's own being, with a focus on potentiality and possibility, is markedly existential and also has clear similarities with what many of the participants describe as both the practical and spiritual programme of AA, where looking away from the self and forgetting one's past is considered the ultimate negation.

## **5.6 Sobering up and looking up**

Throughout their interviews all the participants are very clear that the foundation of their sobriety lies in a belief that a power greater than themselves has helped them to stop drinking (Step 2) and this has been achieved by their decision to turn their life over to a God of their own understanding (Step 3). This research is concerned with how long term sober AA members individually 'live' these two steps, and in so doing, face up to the challenge that AA founders have set their millions of members, to first find their own God and then hand themselves over to that being or beings that they themselves have conceived of. The paradox of self surrender and self empowerment is situated within this AA imperative as it begs the questions, who it is that is actually responsible for the life saving feat of drinking cessation and how is it or what is it that enables the individual to stay sober in the long term? In some respects this is the mystery at the heart of AA, the unlocking of which has the potential to allow its spiritual programme to travel beyond treatment for addiction and into the realms of psychotherapy and 'well being' philosophies. More generally, there is still confusion as to what personal faith actually entails for each individual and specifically how the ability to transcend ourselves and believe in something other than ourselves can in fact lead to a more enduring sense of self and allow us to unlock our being and guard against non-being in our everyday lives.

In addressing this question and considering how the wisdom of AA can be used in psychotherapeutic work, Smale (2010) highlights the suggestion, inherent in AA, that the road to recovery can best be sustained when the individual's instincts are redirected in the service of an objective wider than simply personal fulfilment. He points to the 'value of meaning beyond oneself' as being espoused by therapists who have experienced its value in their own lives and the lives of their clients (e.g. Frankl 1963 and Moody 1997 cited in Smale 2010). Carver and Scheier (1998) similarly contend that having a clearly specified goal at the more

abstract level promotes flexibility and self efficacy and that having a goal requiring a striving towards, rather than an achievement of, leads people to remain “busy being born” (p363). The participants in this study all give voice to the fluid nature of their Higher Power which grows and changes as they grow and change, so whilst the acceptance of otherness remains the same, how this translates into their evolving understanding of their life project and essential concerns is constantly maturing. In broad terms the movement that most of these participants allude to is towards seeing their Higher Power as potentially containing more spiritual sustenance than drinking cessation alone. This process of maturation is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s (1882/1974) child, who follows the camel and the lion and is paradoxically considered to be the most advanced stage of the metamorphosis of the spirit. In AA terms, having been the Camel and thus capable of carrying the burden of not drinking in the early days, the lion then roars with the new found independence of sobriety. Finally the spiritual self in long term sobriety, experienced by these participants as a deeper connection to their Higher Power, then becomes the child who represents innocence and forgetfulness that is not defined by the previous stages of spiritual growth but sees life as new beginning and a “sacred yes” (Nietzsche 1882/1974, p57).

For most AA members, who do not identify as being religious in any traditional sense, this new orientation is specifically achieved through reclaiming the right to personalise faith by creating ones own religiosity and rejecting the theological teachings of organised religion. An understanding of otherness and an acceptance of the need for a personal faith as opposed to pre-packaged faith is at the heart of the existentialist movement and many of the participants in this study reserved their strongest and most critical language for the imposition of religion upon themselves, others in their lives and the world in general. This stance has marked similarities with the opinions of many of the seminal existential philosophers who similarly viewed the ready made meaning and absence of doubt of organised religion as being both

detrimental to and obsolete in western society. Nietzsche (1882/1974) famously declared that God was dead and that human beings had killed him and some of these participants talk about their upbringing, predominantly in the Roman Catholic tradition, and from what they say it is clear that the God of the Catholic Church is 'dead' for them and that their faith in otherness comes from a very different place. Tillich (1952) identifies a mystical longing, where the 'courage to be' is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared; the 'God above God'. Carr (2001) encapsulates this concept well when he describes it as a feeling that "having completely accepted the possibility that God is not there, one discovers that there is still something there" (p258) and this is certainly true for some of these participants in their conception of her Higher Power. Tillich (1948) challenges the individual to forget everything traditional they have learnt about God and thereby open themselves to an 'infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of being' or the depths of their own life and recognise this as God. He believes that the genuine meaning of faith can only be disclosed through a commitment to being personally courageous and thereby allowing our state of being to be "grasped by an ultimate concern" (Tillich 1963:130).

This ultimate concern which includes a faith in self, humankind and living, emerges when the participants are asked what the term Higher Power means to them. They clearly experience it as a force for good and see it as something that is out there and up there as well as inside them and in others. They also convey an understanding that the spiritual world is to be experienced individually and this is the opportunity that their AA membership has presented to them, to have the courage of faith, to find their own meaning by maintaining a constant connection to their own specific sense of the metaphysical as well as the physical dimensions of our existence. During their interviews many of the participants give voice to an uncertainty about the existence of their Higher Power or talk about experiencing a loss of connection to their Higher Power. The personally generated faith that is the essence of an individual's



Higher Power is markedly different from traditional faith which on the whole is not subject to doubt. The act of faith therefore becomes connected to our commitment to our own ultimate concern and especially our doubts about its “concrete content” (Tillich 1957:103) which the act of faith must affirm through courage.

These results therefore point towards an understanding of the Higher Power as being a courageous and personal creation that in reality emanates from the self, is maintained by the self and changes with the self. The uncertainty of their faith but a certainty of the presence of otherness is specifically what empowers these participants with the ‘courage to be’ Tillich (1952). Their ability to transcend themselves and believe in something other than themselves has in fact lead to a more enduring sense of self for each of them and allowed them to unlock their being and guard against non-being in their everyday lives. Faith in a Higher Power, devoid of a road map to heaven and hell, is redefined as a relation to and belief in being itself (Tillich 1952) and the personal courageousness of sobriety for these participants is that element in their faith that is related to ‘the risk of faith’ (Tillich 1957).

Existential therapy, as van Deurzen comments, “aims to enhance a person’s capacity for being reflective about their perspective on the world” (2005, p217) and indeed many clients who seek psychotherapy have not only lost a belief in their own individual being but have also become disillusioned with the universal; with being itself. Following the work of Binswanger (1946), who identified the natural (umwelt), social (mitwelt) and personal (eigenwelt) dimensions of existence, van Deurzen-Smith (1997) identifies the Überwelt, the spiritual dimension. She describes this dimension as being inspired by the work of Kierkegaard (1844), Buber (1923) and Jaspers (1951) and Tillich (1952) representing “the world of our values and beliefs, our ideal world” (2005, pXX) or the meta-world where all the rest of our experience is put into context (1997, p123). This spiritual dimension is the individual’s unique creation based upon opening themselves towards the universal and transcendental nature of their own being

and it is in this light that these participants' acts of surrender to their Higher Power can best be quantified. Consequently, rather than standing back to sidestep life, this type of surrender is specifically about re-engaging in the struggle of life from a more centred and personally empowered standpoint. The concept of centeredness is used here specifically to denote the fact that a person's Higher Power exists within the oneness of their mind and body as their own carnal creation and is only alive whilst the body is alive. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) suggests that our body and the world are intrinsically bound together and in an existential sense it is our embodied existence that is ultimately significant.

## **5.7 Letting go and gaining control**

Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* is also important in understanding more about these participants experience of self surrender. The German-English dictionary offers the words poise, calmness, self composure, sobriety, and serenity as synonyms for *Gelassenheit* and in broad terms it is translated as letting go, letting be, or surrendering ones will to God. Heidegger (1927/1962) used the term to distinguish meditative from calculative thinking and spoke of a 'releasement towards things' and an 'openness to mystery' that allows the individual to notice, to observe, to ponder and to awaken an awareness of what is actually taking place around them (Dalle Pezze 2006). Heidegger (1927/1962) also suggested that in letting go of willing we in fact let ourselves in, which is a different type of empowerment that allows the individual to inhabit the world in a totally different way. Kemp (2011) also understands this point and comments that it is through this 'letting-be' that then human subject is transformed and can claim the otherness which surrounds them and paradoxically already constitutes them. During their interviews these participants all refer to learning to let go and struggling to let go of certain situations in their lives which is understood as being a daily task.

Indeed some of them explicitly refer to the paradox of letting go of something and, as a direct result, getting something back.

Like many thousands of AA members world wide, these participants arrived at their first meeting in a place of despair and personal devastation. AA literature suggests that these feelings are accompanied by a person's acknowledgement that self control or control of others hasn't worked in the past, and so, in order to stop their destructive behaviour, another way has to be found (Alcoholics Anonymous 1976). Letting go of the alcoholic self is therefore the central aim of surrendering and for all the participants in this group of long term sober AA members this involved giving up the idea of omnipotence and self sufficiency whilst at the same time recognising their relative isolation and stuckness. The individuals who took part in this research study all identified their Higher Powers as allowing them to change and take action, to in some way step off and re-enter the flow of life. Smale (2010) follows this way of thinking in observing that active addicts often have little concept of self efficacy or thoughts of internal justification where their addictive behaviour is concerned, and suggests, that whatever its absolute truth, the Higher Power in AA can provide the individual with a self defined justification for a new ability to initiate and maintain sobriety. He highlights the description of the Higher Power in AA literature as being both a power greater than ourselves that mitigates this lack of self efficacy and control and an unsuspected inner resource that allows an internal justification for change (Smale 2010). The challenge of finding their own Higher Power was, for these participants, in line with Kierkegaard's challenge of finding personal faith, which is not about surrendering the ability to choose and to act but about fundamentally increasing it. So, the act of surrender, that they regard as being the key agent of change in their lives and the cornerstone of their sobriety, has nothing to do with blind faith or personal negation for these participants but, as Tillich (1952) says, has everything to do with participating in the universal or divine act of self affirmation.

This study has sought to get underneath the conventional meaning of the term surrender and, by focussing the research on how people actually live surrendering as conceived in AA language, the results point towards a very different understanding of a state of surrender for recovering alcoholics. For them, self surrender equates to surrendering the destructive self in favour of self care, surrendering naivety in favour of conscious intention, surrendering omnipotence to become more potent, surrendering 'shut upness' (Kierkegaard's (1844) term for repression or living a lie) in order to become more free and surrendering to engagement (Heidegger's (1927/1962) 'with-world') and thereby starting to grow. Herein lies the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment at the very heart of AA which, in light of these findings, can best be understood as the urgent need for the individual to surrender themselves precisely so they never lose their-self again.

## **Chapter 6      Conclusion**

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### **6.1      Summary**

For the participants in this study, overcoming what they felt to be their addiction to alcohol over the long term has entailed being able to move beyond the 'white knuckling' or 'dry drunk' phase of their none drinking. These AA terms describe the challenge of overcoming the compulsion to drink, but also imply that the act of not drinking is seldom enough in itself to protect the individual from ever 'picking up' again. The superordinate themes, the Challenge of Being, Being and Otherness, Being and Recovery, Well-Being and Understanding Being, point to the fact that getting sober and staying sober has involved facing up to the nature of being itself as well as to the circumstances of their own lives for these participants. Analysis of their interviews allow us to appreciate that it is this act that ultimately defines and 'saves' these participants and not their membership of AA or their self identification as a recovering alcoholics per se. It is important to remember that for many individuals AA doesn't work first, second or third time or indeed at all. It is the acceptance of the need to face up to the struggles that existence inevitably presents, without escaping into the altered state of drunkenness that is often the deciding factor. For many of these participants this has also involved appreciating that 'knowing without acting' is not enough and that their recovery has been about both attitudinal and behavioural change. Their sober attitude or world view has not only impacted upon their compulsive desire to drink but has clearly enabled them to cope with many others areas of their lives in a better way. There is also much in the participant accounts that show that far from being subsumed in or consumed by AA they have used their membership both as a source of personal empowerment and a potent reminder of the nature of their own selfhood.

The concepts of powerlessness and surrender can mean different things to different people, even within AA, and for the participants in this study, the challenge of conceiving of their own Higher Power and placing their understanding of otherness at the centre of their world view has been about the courage to choose and the courage to create. It is specifically because we have a sense of autonomy that we can believe in what we choose and in the act of handing over or letting go of aspects of their lives that are not within their control, these participants simultaneously accept the need to take personal responsibility for the things that are, in a way they seemed unable to do before joining the AA programme. In so doing they have 'come home' to the reality of their being that is in fact the projection of their being beyond any fixed sense of self and towards the pure intentionality that is authentic being. This fixed sense of self has been paradoxically transcended by fixing as an alcoholic and the freedom to identify as an alcoholic thus, in itself, becomes a deliberate and free act. Opening to the freedom that is actually the human's nature, without becoming overwhelmed and retreating back, requires an everyday courageousness, the need for which is embedded in both the serenity prayer, the essence of the AA programme, and in the existential philosophical tradition, the inspiration for existential psychotherapy.

## **6.2 Significance of this study**

This study challenges the idea that giving up control or being powerless must be a blanket negative and sheds further light on what is actually happening in the lives of recovery alcoholics who choose to surrender in the long term and therefore provides important insights into what the concept of surrendering in AA is actually about. Despite calls for a whole new rhetoric for recovery from within certain sections of the addiction community, often termed the New Recovery Movement (see White 2001 and Keane 2000) and on the basis of 'if it aint broke don't fix it' there is no sense in which this study points towards a need to change the

literature or practices of AA. This research does however provide an important resource for those attempting to understand AA's undoubted success to draw upon, that invites the reader to bracket their assumptions and challenges them to focus on how the programme is lived and understood by those who seek to benefit from its existence and to work back from that place towards definitions and categorisations. Using a qualitative and phenomenological approach this study provides a substantive picture of what some of AA's long term sober members have 'become' as a result of their long term affiliation to the AA fellowship. The snapshots that their interviews provide paint a very different picture to that which is feared by AA's detractors, who envisage a very different outcome if individuals make the programme part of their lives in the long term and continue to attend meetings, tell their story and count the days, months and years since their last drink. So, rather than trying to find a new language for AA, this study has sought to provide new insights and hence a new language for understanding AA. In so doing, this research has deconstructed some of the traditional ways of understanding the AA programme by allowing a comprehensive set of themes and sub themes to emanate from the sober voices of its members, expressing the freedom, empowerment, everyday courage and self directedness that infuses their working of the 12 steps.

Many commentators have observed that the founders and guardians of AA are very clear that they are not trying to extend their message beyond helping a person to give up drinking and maintain an everyday commitment not to drink again. Nevertheless as the age of anxiety tries hard to give way to the age of well-being this study is important in pointing the way to an appreciation of the valuable insights contained within the AA message concerning the art of being-well that may benefit many of us regardless of our relationship to alcohol. Viewed in this light, the interview transcripts at the heart of this work are laden with philosophical as well as spiritual content. They point towards an understanding of personal spirituality as being fundamentally philosophical and furthermore highlights that the branch of philosophy that

underpins the lives of these long term sober AA members is primarily existential. It would seem that Thune (1977) is correct therefore to observe that in many respects AA invokes a spiritual or religious vocabulary in the absence of a perhaps more accurate but inaccessible philosophical-ontological terminology. Consequently this study is therefore also significant in that reveals a clearer and hence more accessible connection between the existential attitude as articulated in the practice of existential psychotherapy and the lived experience of sobriety as maintained through membership of AA. There is no sense in which these connections require a ramming together of two distinct traditions and of course there are still areas of divergence, but they do open the way towards a side by side existence that has traditionally been eschewed.

This research may therefore encourage the addiction and existential communities to re-examine their similarities and differences and henceforth, to draw further conclusions concerning the affinities and reciprocity of ideas that exists between AA 'therapy' and existential therapy, which to date have been seen as an either/or in terms of routes to recovery from addiction. This research has therefore got the potential to benefit the addiction community, in terms of accessing a wealth of relevant knowledge and experience, and the existential psychotherapeutic community, by making way for a new understanding of what long term membership of Alcoholics Anonymous means for the individual specifically as well as what it has to say about individualism in general.

## **6.3 Critical reflections**

### **6.3.1 Strengths and limitations**

As with any study on people's experience, be it quantative or qualitative in design, the present study has both benefited from and been limited by several factors, most importantly its sample



size, and type of methodological framework and researcher fore-conceptions. As a qualitative study using IPA, this research has primarily been concerned with first garnering and then analysing the personal experience of some specific phenomena using a relatively small number of participants (6 in total). This sample size has enabled a rich, textured and three dimensional appreciation of what long term sobriety and the paradox of self surrender and self empowerment has meant for these specific individuals. Regarding the participants as experiential experts on their own lives, and using the hermeneutic circle, this study has therefore generated an illuminating results analysis and discussion, firmly grounded in the experience of its specific participants. There is also an intention that this work should invite the reader to formulate their own judgements and draw their own conclusions. It could be said that this 'triple hermeneutic' is the desired outcome of any IPA study; to say enough and to be sure enough but to always leave room for the reader to make sense of the authors attempt to make sense of the participants experiences and thereby allow the research to retain an aliveness after it has been captured in print.

Although there is no sense in which this work was aimed at defining what sobriety or self surrender 'is' as such, there is nonetheless an obvious limitation in terms of the general claims that can be credibly made with a this type of sample size. Predicated on the belief that it is in the intensity of knowing the other's experience of certain phenomena that the nature of an experience can be most usefully discerned, the small sample size has therefore purposively been aimed at producing depth and not breadth in terms of data. Nonetheless, as I have mentioned in the methodology section, and in line with Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) call for more bold IPA analysis, this study has generated themes that can contribute towards a critical mass of qualitative data that can inspire future research, both qualitative and quantative, directed towards further in depth work as well as hypothesis testing.

With the aim of investigating specific phenomena identified in a particular group of people, IPA, by its very nature, benefits from a fairly homogenous set of research participants, in this case recovering alcoholics within AA with a belief that the programme has worked, and continues to work for them. This type of purposive sampling is used to ensure that the participant group that is generated share a meaningful encounter with particular phenomena, although they will not of course experience these phenomena in the same way. The research need is to avoid a set of data that is neither one thing nor the other, not because of different opinions but because of different levels of exposure to the subject in hand. Whilst this aspect of homogeneity was an undoubted strength in this study, there was also a sense in which geographical constraints point towards certain limitations in terms of participant similarity. All participants lived within the London area, were educated and gainfully employed, most had university degrees and owned their own homes. There was a sense therefore that whilst their ability to reflect and articulate was relatively highly developed, so too was their ability to 'manage' language. Hence, in terms of the socio-economic demographic there would have been 'extra breath to the depth' if some of the long term sober participants had lived in different parts of the country and had a more markedly different economic status and or educative background. It should however be noted that whilst all the participants did reside within the London area there was a good cross cultural mix in terms of countries of origin.

The IPA methodology provided a clear and useful framework for this project and also has a synergy with my own epistemological position. There was nonetheless a sense in which a deeper linguistic analysis would have also provided further insights as would reviewing the data using Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdridge 2007) and thus being able to situate these participant's voices within wider contemporary discourses. When we choose there is always an inherent consequence and an element of loss. In the end however, just as we cannot and should not attempt to be 'all things', nor can any singular piece of research, which should

ultimately seek to engage the reader deeply in what it is rather than aesthetically trying to cover all angles and thus attempt to become something that it is not.

This having been said, and focussing on the research as originally conceived of and designed, with the benefit of hindsight there are certain things I would do differently if I was starting this project again. Firstly, I would have sought a more diverse socio-economic background amongst the participants. Secondly, I would have tried to guard against any sense in which the participants may have wanted to defend or promote the AA programme by asking the question, 'can you describe any ways in which you find your membership of AA to be frustrating or limiting'? Thirdly I might have also asked what the participants views were about psychotherapy and what they think the differences are between AA and psychotherapy. Fourthly, I would have included a little more on some of the divergences in the participant accounts and lastly, I would have taken more time to consider the reasons why some of the individuals I had approached declined to take part in the research.

My training in existential psychotherapy has been both a strength and a limitation in terms of conducting this research. A strength, in as much as I have a background in phenomenology and hermeneutics, an openness to understanding the congruency of different truths, an attraction to certain facets of the lived experience and an 'existential lens' through which I seek to deconstruct certain phenomena, in this case the experience of self surrender. And a limitation, in the respect that with this background and interests I may have been more drawn to explore certain statements more than others during the interviews and to certain passages from the resultant transcripts at the first level of analysis. In attempting to combat this tendency as much as possible I have tried to bracket my assumptions by bringing them to the fore so as to consciously set them aside both before and during the research process. It is also important to bear in mind that this study has been conducted as part completion of a Doctorate in Existential Psychotherapy, and that a necessary fore conception has therefore been that the

nature of the subject, and indeed the research question, has embedded within it some potential to further expand the frontiers of existential psychotherapeutic thought.

### **6.3.2 Reflexivity**

As my first major piece of phenomenological research, the experience of planning, carrying out and writing up this study has inevitably impacted upon me personally and hence the research. Carrying out a detailed pilot study provided the opportunity to reflect upon the double hermeneutic nature of the research methodology and further assess the ways in which my views and assumptions may impact upon the main research. There was a sense in which completing the pilot gave me a feeling of competence, which, rather than making me too sure of what I was going to find, actually allowed me to cultivate an uncertain and investigative disposition as the study continued which I came to appreciate was paradoxically the route to researcher competence. Accordingly, the experience of interviewing these participants and analysing the transcripts of our encounters required me to quieten my fear that in some way I won't get the 'right' material and to let go, as much as possible, of any preconceived ideas of what I 'needed' in the research.

Absorbing myself in the participant's stories of self surrender, again rather paradoxically, helped me to surrender myself to the process, which enabled me to first glimpse and then work within the hermeneutic circle to initially confirm the results and then my interpretations of them. Trusting myself more increased my ability to trust the participants more and experience them as they were rather than attempting to make them into the participants I wanted them to be. The sense of freedom that I began to feel concerning surrendering to what was there and letting the research take its own course encouraged me to work hard to create a rapport with each participant in order to engender an atmosphere of openness and exploration within the confines of the semi structured interview format. The enduring impact that the experience of

carrying out this research has had on me personally as the researcher is to allow me to understand the centeredness, serenity and existential joy that comes with knowing when to hand over and let go.

It has also been important for me, from a reflexive point of view, to capture something of my own subjective experience as the researcher, being as explicit as possible about how this has impacted on the entirety of the research process. Reflecting on my own fore-having generally and then, for this particular research, focusing more specifically on where I went, what I saw, what I said and what was said to me, all impacted upon me and in some way changed my 'horizon of experience'. This in turn impacted the research process itself. Finlay explains that in this context, researcher reflexivity becomes a "process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomena being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings" (Finlay, 2003, p108) When attending my first AA meeting, I was struck by the openness, acceptance and sense of humility that populated the room. Rather than actively having to challenge my prejudices about what really happens at an AA meeting, the atmosphere allowed them to dissolve relatively naturally. I was soon able to connect with the authentic and personal language being used by many AA members to describe life's everyday struggles, the need to take personal responsibility and find meaning in crisis, which had some important parallels with my own life experience and life story. My response to attending AA meetings and talking to AA members directly impacted on this piece of research in as much as it allowed me to trust and respect the participants far more during the interview process and allow them to tell their life stories as openly and personally as possible without falling into the trap of trying to marshal their thoughts or attempt to extract something specific from them.

Being cognisant of my training as a psychotherapist also impacted upon the research process particularly at the interview stage. It was important for me to maintain an awareness that there

was no psychotherapeutic element to these interchanges, which, if present, would have been both counterproductive and potentially harmful. This required me to maintain a clear understanding that I was not attempting to contribute to the continued recovery of these participants in any way and my sole focus should be limited to ascertaining as much as possible about what long term recovery meant to them. This led me to gently redirect aspects of the discussions that might have opened up more emotional content and remember that the participants were seeing me as a researcher gathering information and not as a member of a helping profession.

Once the interview recordings had been transcribed, I knew that immersing myself in the participant's stories, without starting to stratify or group parts of the transcripts together was going to be a particularly difficult challenge because of my tendency to want to order and to clarify. This personal reflection impacted the research through my attempt to clear my mind and focus on the analytic reading, (which the procedure of IPA systematically facilitates) and to continually try to redirect my focus to reporting and noticing and to not organising or interpreting. I consequently found that my 'left hand margin' comments were very full and in places perhaps over meticulous. Nevertheless, once achieved, this discipline helped me to feel more confident about moving on to the more intersubjective and interpretative results analysis and discussion stages of the research process. Consciously locating myself in-relation-to the research participants and thinking more about how my prior understandings of existentialism and alcoholism and my personal experience of anxiety, crisis, personal recovery and continued struggle, helped me to gain greater access to their personal accounts at these important latter stages of the research process, being careful to guard against over identification by clearly separating out what was mine and what was theirs. The intermingling of these two worlds, always orientated towards the other as the experiential expert, inspired the structure and content of my superordinate and subordinate themes (see figure 1 above)

and also allowed me to add 'my voice to theirs' as carefully and consciously as possible in the narrative discussion and concluding thoughts of this project, which were concerned with limitedness, courage, freedom responsibility and individuality, all of which are aspects of being that resonate with my own life experience.

### **6.3.3 Validity and Quality**

In the methodology section of this dissertation I have outlined how Yardley's (2000) guidelines for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research have been taken into consideration in all stages of this particular research process. These four criteria are described as sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. Without engaging in repetition, I feel it is necessary to reconfirm in this concluding chapter how important it is for studies of this nature, that are grounded in the art of interpretation as opposed to the science of information gathering, to have a philosophical, methodological and structural efficacy as well as a potency and contemporary relevance. With this in mind, along with the transcript excerpt illustrating theme development and the master table of themes I have also included the theme tables for each participant in the appendices. The depth behind each of the superordinate and subordinate themes in this study was very marked and their inclusion will not only allow the reader to check validity but also potentially further engage them in the triple hermeneutic and allow them to draw further conclusions.

## **6.4 Suggestions for future research**

In line with the relative paucity of good quality research in the area of long term recovery from addiction within the AA paradigm and recognising the opportunity such a focus provides for learning more about the significance of AA, future research in this area is much needed. In light of these research findings and in the spirit of Miller and Kurtz's (1994) assertion that those

who tell about AA reveal more about themselves than about the fellowship and its programme, a study concerning attitudes towards AA amongst psychotherapists and psychologists could also prove useful. Additionally, a study concerning the attitudes of long term sober AA members to psychotherapy generally and existential psychotherapy specifically would also be potentially illuminating. Studies designed to operationalize handing over, accepting limitedness, and promoting everyday courage would also seem to emanate from this research and could be conducted within the addiction or existential psychotherapeutic communities.

Future research, looking at the alternate perspective to this current research could also be important in ascertaining more about what success or failure in AA actually equates to? This would involve participants for whom AA hasn't worked and explore whether this was because of fear of loss of self/agency, an actual loss of self/agency or paradoxically an inability or unwillingness to take responsibility for themselves and reconnect with their sense of agency? It may also prove fruitful to engage in some outcomes based research, focussed on total abstinence, which tests specific ways of working existentially with clients who experience their relationship with and use of alcohol as harming themselves and others around them.

## **6.5 Clinical implications**

The results of this study point towards an affinity between the lived experience of sobriety and the challenge of being that is encapsulated in the existential philosophical tradition which underpins existential psychotherapy. From the point of view of existential psychotherapy it is the real self of potentiality, fluidity, personal truth, honesty and inward reflection that we are initially trying to help our clients uncover and then connect with through the therapeutic experience. This would also seem to be the desired outcome of AA as group therapy. The implications of this research are therefore concerned with broadening the realm of understanding, amongst existential psychotherapists specifically, about the existential



awakenings that can, and often do accompany AA membership and working the 12 steps. There has often been a quiet acceptance amongst those in the psychological and psychotherapeutic community that AA 'clearly works for some'. This research challenges those professionals, again, specifically in the existential realm, to come to terms with AA, get underneath the language and perhaps start to view it as an important resource to inform certain aspects of the practice of psychotherapy and simultaneously come to appreciate that some of its most successful outcomes are a profound validation of existentialism as therapy.

The idea that attending AA or seeking psychotherapy is essentially an either-or is consequently called into question by these research findings and whilst certain modalities may be more divergent, the existential approach is shown to be more convergent and therefore potentially complimentary. Perhaps the most important clinical outcome will therefore be to inform existential psychotherapists further about the nature and potential long term outcomes of AA, which will in turn give them more choice concerning how to engage meaningfully and congruently with clients who are thinking about and want to talk about going to an AA meeting. Furthermore, this research may allow a greater number of existential psychotherapists to consider actively suggesting that finding out more about AA could be useful for clients who appear to be overcome by excessive drinking and to reassure them that attending AA does not have to be fundamentally at odds with them also engaging in existential psychotherapeutic work. Finally it is also hoped that this research may speak to those in AA who are opposed to any members engaging in psychotherapy, by encouraging them to differentiate between different theoretical frameworks within the discipline of psychotherapy and to learn more about the existential approach.

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## Appendix 1 - Ethical Clearance

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### Psychology Department

#### REQUEST FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

**Applicant (specify):** UG PG (Module:.....) PhD STAFF  
submitted:.....

Date

**No study may proceed until this form has been signed by an authorised person, indicating that ethical approval has been granted.** For collaborative research with another institution, ethical approval must be obtained from all institutions involved.

This form should be accompanied by any other relevant materials, (e.g. questionnaire to be employed, letters to participants/institutions, advertisements or recruiting materials, information sheet for participants<sup>1</sup>, consent form<sup>2</sup>, or other, including approval by collaborating institutions). A fuller description of the study may be requested.

• Is this the first submission of the proposed study? Yes/~~No~~

• Is this an amended proposal (resubmission)? ~~Yes~~/No

**Psychology Office: if YES, please send this back to the original referee**

• Is this an urgent application? (To be answered by Staff/Supervisor only) Yes/No

Supervisor to initial here \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of investigator(s) **Marc Medina**

Name of supervisor(s) **Pnina Shinebourne**

Title of study:

**The Paradox Of Self Surrender And Self Empowerment: An Interpretative Phenomenological Investigation Of The Individual's Understanding Of The Higher Power In Alcoholics Anonymous.**

1. Please attach a brief description of the nature and purpose of the study, including details of the procedure to be employed. Identify the ethical issues involved, particularly in relation to the treatment/experiences of participants, session length, procedures, stimuli, responses, data collection, and the storage and reporting of data.

**SEE ATTACHED PROJECT PROPOSAL**

2. Could any of these procedures result in any adverse reactions?

YES/NO

If “yes”, what precautionary steps are to be taken?

Describing the experience of surrendering to and living with the higher power goes to the heart of an AA member’s understanding of themselves, their sobriety and the world in which they live. It is therefore likely that there will be some level of emotional reaction, which may be experienced as negative that results from participating in this research. It is also possible that the experience of being a research participant per se could also cause an adverse reaction.

It is therefore extremely important that I consider the ethical and psychological consequences of participating in this research from the point of view of those who have been kind and generous enough to take part in it. This involves taking proactive steps to address any potential adverse reactions which may occur as a result of the research topic or the management procedures that are employed. This is a process which entails considering the participants fundamental rights to autonomy, privacy and non-maleficence, as well as my obligation to promote justice and beneficence both in carrying out and disseminating my work.

I am also mindful of the fact that research can develop in ways that raise unforeseen ethical implications. This is especially true for qualitative research where the developing nature of the research and the emphasis on researcher reflexivity will require me to ensure that I undertake periodic reviews of how the research is developing from an ethical perspective and address any issues or dilemmas that may arise with my supervisor, peer reviewer and where appropriate with the participants themselves.

I am guided in this research by the belief that whilst there is always some level of risk associated with participating in research of this nature it is important that participants are not being asked to take risks over and above those they normally would in everyday life or expose themselves to an increased possibility that they will come to any harm. I am also aware that as a psychotherapist I have an enhanced duty of care to assess the emotional impact of participating in this research which exists not only at the outset, but throughout the research process. Similarly I am also mindful of the fact that I will be seen as a psychotherapist as well as

a researcher by my research participants, where again they may reasonably assume a level of care is being taken in the way that consent, interviews, debriefing and dissemination is carried out.

I have familiarised myself with the BPS literature on the principles, approval procedure and code of conduct for carrying out psychological research. I have also read more widely concerning ethical perspectives in qualitative research to prepare myself to conduct this research as ethically as possible in the broadest sense. I have come to appreciate that this involves more than 'ticking the boxes', and involves a heightened awareness of the ethical dimension in real time encounters with unique individuals, which is really where principles of autonomy, non maleficence, justice and trustworthiness are brought to bear in the moment in what we chose to say and do. Staying true to these principles will also involve keeping clear records of the various stages of my research in order that it can be audited if necessary and that the originality of the data collected can be verified.

In terms of avoiding any harm by a breach in confidentiality I will ensure I restrict the scope of any disclosure to that which is consistent with the professional purposes of my research and that data collected is stored in a secure, locked area to avoid any inadvertent disclosure. Both these points will be explained to potential participants before any interviews commence. I will also make it clear to participants from the outset the circumstances in which information they may give may need to be disclosed to a third party, e.g. a participant indicating that they intend to harm themselves or others, or providing information that associates them with terrorist activities.

I have already consulted individuals within the AA community about my research and sought their opinions as to what the potential impact might be on those taking part. The feedback was that as all the research participants will be long term sober (5 years plus) and as such, well used to talking about their relationship with alcohol and philosophy of life within AA, it is unlikely that participating in this research would result in an unacceptably adverse reaction. I am mindful however that talking in detail about their sobriety and their spirituality with a non alcoholic, who is outside the AA movement, could increase the chance of an adverse emotional reaction.

This circumstance will require me to know as much about the AA movement as possible before beginning the research (something I am already doing by reading AA published literature and attending meetings), and to clearly communicate my fundamental respect to each participant for the way they have chosen to overcome their problematic relationship with alcohol through the AA twelve step programme. This will form the basis for creating a trusting and fruitful researcher participant encounter.

There will be an 'appropriate exclusion' in this research to protect the health and well being of potential participants; Participants will therefore need to be over 5 years sober and be able to report that they are not currently in a problematic place concerning their continued sobriety. It is

also the case that participants will, by definition, be regularly attending a support group, AA, and will have an ongoing relationship with a sponsor who would be able to provide emotional support. It is still possible however that participating in this research may bring up unforeseen issues and stimulate painful memories and I will therefore also be providing a list of local counsellors in the area that will be given to participants who show any signs of distress or request help in seeking emotional support at the end of the interview. As I am not going to be offering any remuneration, except for expenses, this will also mitigate against inducing potential research participants to expose themselves to any emotional or psychological harm by taking part in the research for financial gain.

I will also seek to avoid any harm to potential participants by informing them in advance, via the attached information sheet, of the nature and purpose of the research and location of the interviews, as well as the expected benefits and the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part. I will highlight the fact that participation in the research is entirely voluntary and that the participant can withdraw from the process at any point without giving any reason. I will also undertake my own informal assessment of the suitability of each potential participant to be able to take part in the study and understand the nature of the informed consent and will also monitor participants for any signs of emotional distress during the interviews and terminate the interview if I feel that any harm is being caused.

Debriefing will take place after each interview and then again 2 weeks hence. This will provide an opportunity to clear up any misconceptions about the nature of the research that may have arisen as a result of going through the interview process and allow me to address any other concerns that a participant may have or help them to arrange any other support they may need as a result of participating in the research. I will also ensure that any feedback that is gained from these debriefings, especially from the pilot interview, is integrated into my research procedures, thus avoiding replicating any practice that may have caused concern.

As an existential psychotherapist and researcher I am also aware that what may potentially cause harm to one participant may not prove difficult to another. My challenge is therefore to continually be aware and where appropriate actively enquire, at any stage in the process, how each participant is feeling and specifically whether they are feeling any distress as a result of being generous enough to take part in my research project.

3. Will any form of deception be involved that raises ethical issues?

**YES/NO**

*(Most studies in psychology involve mild deception insofar as participants are unaware of the experimental hypotheses being tested. Deception becomes unethical if participants are likely to feel angry or humiliated when the deception is revealed to them).*



Note: if this work uses existing records/archives and does not require participation per se, tick here .....

and go to question 10. (Ensure that your data handling complies with the Data Protection Act).

4. If participants other than Middlesex University students are to be involved, where do you intend to recruit them? (A full risk assessment must be conducted for any work undertaken off university premises)<sup>6,7</sup>

Within the Alcoholics Anonymous community.

5. Does the study involve

Clinical populations

~~YES~~/NO

Children (under 16 years)

~~YES~~/NO

Vulnerable adults such as individuals with mental health problems,  
learning disabilities, prisoners, elderly, young offenders?

~~YES~~/NO

6. How, and from whom (e.g. from parents, from participants via signature) will informed consent be obtained? (See consent guidelines<sup>2</sup>; note special considerations for some questionnaire research)

From participant's signature on consent form.

7. Will you inform participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, without penalty? (see consent guidelines<sup>2</sup>)

~~YES~~/NO

8. Will you provide a full debriefing at the end of the data collection phase?

~~YES~~/NO

(see debriefing guidelines<sup>3</sup>)

9. Will you be available to discuss the study with participants, if necessary, to monitor any negative effects or misconceptions?

~~YES~~/NO

If "no", how do you propose to deal with any potential problems?

10. Under the Data Protection Act, participant information is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Will confidentiality be guaranteed? (see confidentiality guidelines<sup>5</sup>) **YES/NO**

All identifiable material will be coded and stored in a locked location to protect anonymity and confidentiality. I will also ensure that as many potentially identifying details as possible are anonymised in any future publication, presentation or discussion of my work.

If "yes" how will this be assured (see<sup>5</sup>)

All data collected (taped) will be anonymous and will be destroyed once a transcript has been completed. All materials will be kept under lock and key in a secure location. No information

If "no", how will participants be warned? (see<sup>5</sup>)

(NB: You are not at liberty to publish material taken from your work with individuals without the prior agreement of those individuals).

11. Are there any ethical issues which concern you about this particular piece of research, not covered elsewhere on this form? **YES/NO**

**Yes No**

12. Some or all of this research is to be conducted away from Middlesex University

✓

If "yes", tick here to confirm that a Risk Assessment form is to be submitted

✓

13. I am aware that any modifications to the design or method of this proposal will require me to submit a new application for ethical approval

✓

14. I am aware that I need to keep all materials/documents relating to this study (e.g. participant consent forms, filled questionnaires, etc) until completion of my degree.

✓

15. I have read the British Psychological Society's *Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human participants*<sup>4</sup> and believe this proposal to conform with them

✓

If "yes" please specify:

(NB: If "yes" has been responded to any of questions 2,3,5,11 or "no" to any of questions 7-10, a full explanation of the reason should be provided -- if necessary, on a separate sheet submitted with this form).

Researcher..... date .....

Signatures of approval: Supervisor..... date .....

Ethics Panel ..... date .....

(signed, pending completion of a Risk Assessment form if applicable)

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> **Guidelines are available from the Ethics page of Oasis Plus**

## Appendix 2 - Risk Assessment

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### INDEPENDENT FIELD/LOCATION WORK RISK ASSESSMENT FRA1

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*This proforma is applicable to, and must be completed in advance for, the following fieldwork situations:*

- 1. All fieldwork undertaken independently by individual students, either in the UK or overseas, including in connection with proposition module or dissertations. Supervisor to complete with student(s).*
- 2. All fieldwork undertaken by postgraduate students. Supervisors to complete with student(s).*
- 3. Fieldwork undertaken by research students. Student to complete with supervisor.*
- 4. Fieldwork/visits by research staff. Researcher to complete with Research Centre Head.*
- 5. Essential information for students travelling abroad can be found on [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)*

#### FIELDWORK DETAILS

---

Name:	<b>Marc Medina</b>	Student No.
		Research Centre (staff only)
		.....

---

Supervisor:	<b>Pnina Shinebourne</b>	Degree course:
		<b>DProf in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling</b>

---

Telephone numbers and name of next of kin who may be contacted in the event of an accident	NEXT OF KIN:
	Name: <b>Paul McMichael</b>
	Phone: <b>020 7731 4751</b>

---

Physical or psychological limitations to carrying out the proposed fieldwork	<b>None</b>
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Any health problems (full details) which may be relevant to proposed fieldwork activity in case of emergencies.	<b>None</b>
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Locality (Country and Region)	<b>London, England. Interviews will take place in a dedicated counselling room in my home in Fulham, West London.</b>
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Travel Arrangements	<b>Participants will be able to travel to this location using public transport, their own</b>
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**vehicle or cycle.**

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NB: Comprehensive travel and health insurance must always be obtained for independent overseas fieldwork.

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Dates of Travel and Fieldwork

**Field work proposed to take place between  
January and March 2010.**

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**PLEASE READ THE INFORMATION OVERLEAF VERY CAREFULLY**

**Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment**

**PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY**

List the localities to be visited or specify routes to be followed **(Col. 1)**.

For each locality, enter the potential hazards that may be identified beyond those accepted in everyday life. Add details giving cause for concern **(Col. 2)**.

**Examples of Potential Hazards :**

Adverse weather: exposure (heat, sunburn, lightening, wind, hypothermia)

Terrain: rugged, unstable, fall, slip, trip, debris, and remoteness. Traffic: pollution.

Demolition/building sites, assault, getting lost, animals, disease.

Working on/near water: drowning, swept away, disease (weils disease, hepatitis, malaria, etc), parasites', flooding, tides and range.

Lone working: difficult to summon help, alone or in isolation, lone interviews.

Dealing with the public: personal attack, causing offence/intrusion, misinterpreted, political, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic differences/problems. Known or suspected criminal offenders.

Safety Standards (other work organisations, transport, hotels, etc), working at night, areas of high crime.

Ill health: personal considerations or vulnerabilities, pre-determined medical conditions (asthma, allergies, fitting) general fitness, disabilities, persons suited to task.

Articles and equipment: inappropriate type and/or use, failure of equipment, insufficient training for use and repair, injury.

Substances (chemicals, plants, bio- hazards, waste): ill health - poisoning, infection, irritation, burns, cuts, eye-damage.

Manual handling: lifting, carrying, moving large or heavy items, physical unsuitability for task

If no hazard can be identified beyond those of everyday life, enter 'NONE'.

1. LOCALITY/ROUTE	2. POTENTIAL HAZARDS
<p>143 Bishops Mansions, Stevenage Road, London SW6 6DX.</p> <p>This location is a ten minute walk from the nearest tube station and a five minute walk from the nearest bus stop</p> <p>There are parking bays for metered parking and a place to secure a bicycle.</p> <p>The route to this location is well lit and populated during the day and evening.</p>	NONE

The University Fieldwork code of Practice booklet provides practical advice that should be followed in planning and conducting fieldwork.

### Risk Minimisation/Control Measures

#### PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY

For each hazard identified (Col 2), list the precautions/control measures in place or that will be taken (Col 3) to "reduce the risk to acceptable levels", and the safety equipment (Col 5) that will be employed.

Assuming the safety precautions/control methods that will be adopted (Col. 3), categorise the fieldwork risk for each location/route as negligible, low, moderate or high (Col. 4).

**Risk increases with both the increasing likelihood of an accident and the increasing severity of the consequences of an accident.**

**An acceptable level of risk is:** a risk which can be safely controlled by person taking part in the activity using the precautions and control measures noted including the necessary instructions, information and training relevant to that risk. The resultant risk should not be significantly higher than that encountered in everyday life.

**Examples of control measures/precautions:**

Providing adequate training, information & instructions on fieldwork tasks and the safe and correct use of any equipment, substances and personal protective equipment. Inspection and safety check of any equipment prior to use. Assessing individual's fitness and suitability to environment and tasks involved. Appropriate clothing, environmental information consulted and advice followed (weather conditions, tide times etc.). Seek advice on harmful plants, animals & substances that may be encountered, including information and instruction on safe procedures for handling hazardous substances. First aid provisions, inoculations, individual medical requirements, logging of location, route and expected return times of lone workers. Establish emergency procedures (means of raising an alarm, back up arrangements). Working with colleagues (pairs). **Lone working is not permitted where the risk of physical or verbal violence is a realistic possibility.** Training in interview techniques and avoiding /defusing conflict, following advice from local organisations, wearing of clothing unlikely to cause offence or unwanted attention. Interviews in neutral locations. Checks on Health and Safety standards & welfare facilities of travel, accommodation and outside organisations. Seek information on social/cultural/political status of fieldwork area.

**Examples of Safety Equipment:** Hardhats, goggles, gloves, harness, waders, whistles, boots, mobile phone, ear protectors, bright fluorescent clothing (for roadside work), dust mask, etc.

If a proposed locality has not been visited previously, give your authority for the risk assessment stated or indicate that your visit will be preceded by a thorough risk assessment.

3. PRECAUTIONS / CONTROL MEASURES	4. RISK ASSESSMENT (low, moderate, high)	5. SAFETY/EQUIPMENT
Each Participant will be shown the means of escape in the event of a fire.	<b>LOW</b>	A smoke alarm is situated above the door outside the therapy room. A fire extinguisher is situation outside the front door in the communal hallway of the premises, approximately 4 metres from the therapy room. I will always have a mobile phone on my person during the interviews in case there is a need to call the emergency services.
I am familiar with working in this location.	<b>LOW</b>	

**PLEASE READ INFORMATION OVERLEAF AND SIGN AS APPROPRIATE**

**DECLARATION:** The undersigned have assessed the activity and the associated risks and declare that there is no significant risk or that the risk will be controlled by the method(s) listed above/over. Those participating in the work have read the assessment and will put in place precautions/control measures identified.

NB: Risk should be constantly reassessed during the fieldwork period and additional precautions taken or fieldwork discontinued if the risk is seen to be unacceptable.

Signature of Fieldworker (Student/Staff)	.....	Date	.....
Signature of Student Supervisor	.....	Date	.....
APPROVAL: (ONE ONLY)		Date	
Signature of Director of Programmes (undergraduate students only)	.....		.....
Signature of Research Degree Co-ordinator or Director of Programmes (Postgraduate)	.....	Date	.....
Signature of Research Centre Head (for staff fieldworkers)	.....	Date	.....



### FIELDWORK CHECK LIST

1. Ensure that **all members** of the field party possess the following attributes
  - ☐ Safety equipment and protective clothing?
2. (where relevant) at a level appropriate to the proposed activity and likely field conditions:
  - ☐ Safety knowledge and training?
  - ☐ Awareness of cultural, social and political differences?
  - ☐ Physical and psychological fitness and disease immunity, protection and awareness?
  - ☐ Personal clothing and safety equipment?
  - ☐ Suitability of fieldworkers to proposed tasks?
3. Have all the necessary arrangements been made and information/instruction gained, and have the relevant authorities been consulted or informed with regard to:
  - ☐ Visa, permits?
  - ☐ Legal access to sites and/or persons?
  - ☐ Political or military sensitivity of the proposed topic, its method or location?
  - ☐ Weather conditions, tide times and ranges?
  - ☐ Vaccinations and other health precautions?
  - ☐ Civil unrest and terrorism?
  - ☐ Arrival times after journeys?
  - ☐ Financial and insurance implications?
  - ☐ Crime risk?
  - ☐ Health insurance arrangements?
  - ☐ Emergency procedures?
  - ☐ Transport use?

☐ Travel and accommodation arrangements?

Participants will be reimbursed for all travel expenses. Participants will have my mobile number to contact me if they are having any problems finding the location. It is not envisaged that any participants will require overnight accommodation.

**Important information for retaining evidence of completed risk assessments:**

Once the risk assessment is completed and approval gained the **supervisor** should retain this form and issue a copy of it to the fieldworker participating on the field course/work. In addition the **approver** must keep a copy of this risk assessment in an appropriate Health and Safety file.

RP/cc 15/09/08

## **Appendix 3 - Participant Information Sheet**

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### **Participant Information sheet**

**The Paradox Of Self Surrender And Self Empowerment: An Interpretative Phenomenological Investigation Of The Individual's Understanding Of The Higher Power In Alcoholics Anonymous.**

**Simply put, I will be researching different people's experiences of surrendering to and living with the higher power in AA.**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

- To find out more about what it feels like to surrender to and live with the higher power in your life.
- To find out more about how handing yourself over to the higher power has helped you to increase your sense of control over your life.
- To consider (in light of what I find out) what we can learn from AA members' acceptance of the higher power that can increase understanding of the spiritual aspect of psychotherapy.
- To consider (in light of what I find out) what constitutes a healthy sense of self for AA members who are maintaining long term sobriety and comment upon what we can learn from this in the field of psychotherapy.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part in this research, you will be interviewed by me for approximately one hour. The interview will consist of different questions that are designed to allow you to talk about your personal experience and understanding of the higher power. The interviews will take place in a dedicated therapy room in Fulham, West London. You will be reimbursed for any out of pocket expenses you may incur as a result of attending the interview. After the interview is finished there will be some time set aside to talk about how it felt for you to take part and for me to answer any questions, address any concerns, and talk about any difficult feelings that may have come up for you. I will also contact you two weeks after your interview to check how you are feeling after taking part and to answer any further questions that you may have.

The interviews will be recorded and then typed out. When each interview has been typed out the tape recording will be destroyed. All personal information will be kept in a secure place and

be coded to protect your anonymity. My research involves analyzing the contents of all the interviews and writing about the similarities and differences that appear. My research findings may be published and discussed in public forums and here again no personal details, e.g. name, date of birth or address etc, will be included.

### **Possible disadvantages and risks of you taking part**

It may be the case that talking about the spiritual aspect of your sobriety could bring up difficult memories and feelings which may cause you some level of emotional distress.

### **Who has reviewed this study?**

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics committee before they can proceed. The Middlesex Psychology Department's Ethics Committee has reviewed this proposal.

### **Consent information**

You will be given a copy of the above information and asked to sign a consent form prior to taking part. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time (including during and after the interview) without giving a reason.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns: Email, [marcmedina@btinternet.com](mailto:marcmedina@btinternet.com) or phone 07973224302

My research supervisor is Pnina Shinebourne. If you have any concerns about the study or you would like verification then you can email or write to her at the following address:

The New School of Psychotherapy and Counseling, Royal Waterloo House, 51-55 Waterloo Road, London, SE1 8TX. Email: [pnina.shinebourne@nspc.org.uk](mailto:pnina.shinebourne@nspc.org.uk)

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information and for your interest in this research.**

## **Appendix 4 – Participant Consent Form**

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**Middlesex University School of Health and Social Science  
Psychology Department**

### **Participant Consent Form**

**The Paradox Of Self Surrender And Self Empowerment: An Interpretative Phenomenological Investigation Of The Individual's Understanding Of The Higher Power In Alcoholics Anonymous.**

Researcher: **Marc Medina**

Supervisor: **Pnina Shinebourne**

I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I am prepared to consent to act as a participant in the above mentioned research project.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

I understand that a recording is being made of this interview and will be securely stored until a verbatim transcript has been made

I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and provide my consent for this.

Print name:

Signature:

Date:

Marc Medina, Doctoral Research  
New School of Psychotherapy and Counseling  
Middlesex University.

Appendix 5 -

## **Appendix 5 - Interview Procedure and Schedule**

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I will begin each interview by briefly introducing the research topic and explain the aims and objectives of the research and the format of the interview. I will answer any questions that may have arisen as a result of participants having read and digested the information sheet and consent form that will already have been sent to each participant. I will go through the consent form and explicitly highlight to each participant their right to terminate the interview at any point without needing to give any reason for doing so. At the end of each interview I will go through the debriefing process.

1. What does the term Higher Power mean to you? Has it changed over time? In what ways?
2. Can you describe how you came to turn to or accept the higher power into your life?
3. In what ways has surrendering to the higher power been an important aspect of your recovery?
4. Can you describe some of the significant experiences in your life that have enabled you to stop drinking and maintain your sobriety
5. What does Religion mean to you? Has it changed over time? In what ways?
6. What does the term spirituality mean to you? Has it changed over time? In what ways?
7. How do you experience the higher power in your everyday life? Can you give me some examples?
8. Does the higher power have any specific form, location or visual representation for you? If so what?
9. Are there any ways in which you feel that the higher power, as you understand it, differs from the higher power that you read about in AA literature and hear talked about at AA meetings? If yes: can you describe these differences?
10. Can you give some examples of how accepting the higher power has shaped you as a person?
11. What does the term personal freedom mean to you? How has surrendering to the higher power impacted on your sense of personal freedom?
12. Can you describe what surrendering means to you?
13. In what ways has surrendering to the higher power changed the way you see yourself and your life?
14. What does the term personal courage mean to you?
15. Do you feel that surrendering to the higher power was a courageous act? If yes: in what way? If not: why not?

16. Are there any other aspects of your personal experience of the higher power that has not been covered that you would like to talk about?
17. Could I lastly ask you to confirm the length of your sobriety, your age, ethnic origin, occupation and relationship status?

I am aware that new themes or topics pertinent to my research may emerge during some of the interviews that had not occurred to me during the production of these questions that I will investigate further with the same style of enquiry.

### **Debriefing Procedure**

In studies, such as this one, where the participants are aware that they have taken part in an investigation, once the data has been collected, the researcher should provide the participants with any additional information that may be necessary to complete their understanding of the nature of the research. Debriefing will also provide an opportunity for me to reiterate my thanks to each participant for taking part.

The debriefing procedure focuses on the rights and well being of the participants. Discussing each participant's experience of taking part in the research will allow me to monitor any unforeseen negative effects or misconceptions that may have arisen for each participant, allow time to explore these issues, provide some emotional support and if necessary arrange for further assistance. Participants will be contacted (unless they say otherwise) 2 weeks after their interview which will provide a further opportunity for me to enquire as to how they are feeling and address any further questions or concerns that may have arisen in the intervening period.

I am mindful of the need to exercise particular caution when going through the debriefing process when responding to requests for advice from participants concerning psychological or other issues. I will have a list of local UKCP registered or BACP accredited counsellors on hand in order that I can refer any participants who need further support to a qualified practitioner for personal therapy.

I am aware that even though I have an ethical obligation to offer a full debriefing some participants may not want to be debriefed, a decision that I will respect. I am also aware that debriefing does not provide a justification for any unethical aspects of the research.

The aim of the debriefing is to ensure that, as far as possible, each participant leaves the research with as positive a frame of mind as they had on entering. I will therefore have thought about, and be able to communicate, the positive aspects and potentially groundbreaking outcomes of this research and be able to locate each participants role as having been significant in this research endeavour.

Validating the role of each participant in the debriefing process will ensure, as much as possible, that participants will conclude their involvement in this research feeling affirmed in their original decision to take part.

Before they leave the interview participants will be reminded that if they feel troubled about anything they have shared, that they should not hesitate to contact me via email: [marcmedina@btinternet.com](mailto:marcmedina@btinternet.com) or by phone 07973 224302.

## Appendix 6 – Developing Themes

Developing Emergent Themes		
Exploratory Comments	Original transcript	Emergent Themes
<p>Use of clear language and AA terminology to communicate her understanding of the existence of something in her world that she experiences as more powerful than herself.</p> <p>Higher power as a fluid and not a fixed presence, up to her to interpret its different meanings. Attunement to otherness and creation of her own higher power. The courage to let go of religious certainty.</p> <p>Separating god from religion. Reclaiming the idea of god from organised religion. Her decision to be a lapsed catholic, "which is fine" i.e. giving herself permission not to believe in organised religion.</p> <p>Locating the Higher Power in other people, so not necessarily transcendent. Collective wisdom of the fellowship emanating from individual contributions, so not necessarily from AA framework literature and traditions. Suggesting that her experience is shared by others.</p> <p>Higher power identified as occurring externally in the energy created by being with others as well as internally; Spiritual awakening and a sense of centeredness within.</p>	<p>Well it's a power greater than myself. It can mean at any time different things. Sometimes it's God although I'm not a religious person, I'm a lapsed Catholic so I don't have a great belief in organised religion, which is fine, but I think the higher power sometimes it's the fellowship, it's the people and I think a lot of people will say that. It's the fellowship as a whole, it's other people and what they say. It's something you can get from a meeting, you can feel a higher power in the meeting and sometimes I have felt it within myself. Not that I'm saying I've got it but just sometimes I felt that I've been shown</p>	<p>The limited self and acceptance of otherness. Situating oneself in relation to otherness.</p> <p>The importance of the self in perceiving otherness.</p> <p>Spiritual self emerging from religious self. Self empowerment; taking responsibility for own beliefs.</p> <p>Higher Power as part of our being- towards-others. Connected self; relatedness.</p> <p>Recovery as both participation and individuation. Higher power within experienced as self belief.</p> <p>Balance between self and otherness; part of the challenge of being. Feeling omnipotent as being part of the alcoholic self?</p> <p>Surrendering to the higher power as openness to being? The ground of being, who is god when god is dead'.</p>



<p>Avoidance of spiritual pride; becoming God/higher power. Acceptance of the constant need to question and implying a danger in feeling that she's 'got it'.</p> <p>Idea of being 'shown the way' and it being about openness and relatedness rather than taking instruction as such. Shown how to do as opposed to having something done for her. Certain type of help; not done for her.</p> <p>Reaching out and remaining open to others and otherness at difficult times. Not isolating is sober tendency rather than alcoholic tendency.</p> <p>Feels she has reached the limit of what she can do alone. Double use of "absolute", reinforcing feeling of crisis and aloneness.</p> <p>Being is always fluid; "something happens". Not the phone call itself but how she perceives it and her readiness to reach out and accept help. "Next little bit"; there is no permanent or universal answer to the challenge of being.</p> <p>Always responsible for enacting: Self surrender and reaching out, but also prepared to do 'the work'. Self belief; able to meet the challenges of life and move herself through crisis, understanding that no-thing can do that for her.</p>	<p>how to do something or I've been helped in a certain way. Usually at very difficult times in one's life. It isn't just a feeling, it's just you feel you've come to the end of the road about something, you're in a place of absolute despair and you don't know what to do next and something happens, the phone rings and a person emerges who can absolutely help you through the next little bit of whatever it is you need to do.</p>	<p>Helped to take responsibility, not give over responsibility. Connected self, sober self, empowered self; learning to struggle.</p> <p>Self in crisis, despair as feeling of stuckness. The everyday courage to carry on despite despair; well being?</p> <p>Synchronicity and being in flow.</p> <p>Recovery: Courageous self, surrendered self responsible self and empowered self.</p>
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## Appendix 7 –Table of Master Themes – All Participants

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<b>The Challenge of Being</b>	
<b>The Connected Self</b>	
<i>Valerie:</i> If I have any craving for that sort of community, which I think a lot of people have and go for, I get it through the AA meetings.	352-354
<i>Lena:</i> When I can't see my way out of the woods, I talk to people that I trust.	1033-1034
<i>Howard:</i> Also what stopped me was having commitments in AA, and having friendships in AA.	412-414
<i>Frances:</i> My attitude somehow or other seemed to change because I was never a joiner, I was never a participant.	381-382
<i>Christopher</i> ...and through getting to know them a little better I could actually define a bit more about who I was.	317-320
<i>Brian:</i> I'm feeling good about myself, and all that's connected to my spirituality, and now I'm open I have great relationships with people.	347-349
<b>The Responsible Self</b>	
<i>Valerie:</i> I've just done as hard as I can. I remember thinking when I came into AA, I want this more than I've ever wanted anything.	963-965
<i>Lena:</i> And there's also a Quaker expression, 'Pray but move thy feet.' It's not that I just sit there, I'm not a puppet, I'm born with common sense and intelligence, and I am meant to use that.	397-402
<i>Howard:</i> I need to do my own... make my decisions and trust that the decisions I'm making are healthy for me and not screwing someone over, so that's what I've always operated in.	200-204
<i>Frances:</i> Nobody else could take responsibility for my drinking except me.	342-343
<i>Christopher:</i> But that's alright. Actually, it's about me doing the work and actually	892-894

all the other situations become based on it.

*Brian:* I think a lot of the practices in AA are about taking responsibility. However, 165-167  
from the outside it could look as if it isn't

### **The Empowered Self**

*Valerie:* It allows you to acknowledge that there is a struggle. And it allows you to 1066-1070  
realise that the coping mechanisms you started to adopt as a child you can't do  
as your life becomes more complex.

*Lena:* I don't feel so limited now. And it is that thing, the wisdom to know the 1057-1059  
difference.

*Howard:* Well you see them like, they do things which maybe they wouldn't do 926-929  
before. They embark on life changes which there was no way they'd have been  
able to do before.

*Frances:* It's the paradox and if you can let go of the power, the power of control 130-132  
then you get a kind of power back.

*Christopher:* It's facing up to self. Doesn't mean I necessarily like it all the time. 549-550

*Brian:* Faith in my own power, faith in myself. Yeah, faith in the higher power, but 771-772  
also faith in myself.

## **Being and Otherness**

### **The Religious Self**

*Valerie:* And so I was very frightened when I came in because I thought if you 54-56  
have to believe in God I can't.

*Lena:* To me it feels intrusive, and almost like rape, when someone is telling me 831-833  
how to interpret God.

*Howard:* I feel sad for people who have got religion without a higher power. 518-519

*Frances:* Now some other people....they will rest there, as it were, and they will 99-103  
feel quite content with.... the old God.

*Christopher:* The practices of most major religions tends to bring in the prejudices 673-679

and egos. [Says angrily] The Pope just... comes and tells that person this is right or this isn't right. I'm tired of encyclicals; tired, please stop, you know. Who are you?

*Brian:* I had this fear associated with religion, because deep down I knew I wasn't adding up to everything I was supposed to add up to. 250-253

### **The Spiritual Self**

*Valerie:* I see the spiritual side of it as being a direct outcome. I think it allows me to live what I believe the spiritual way of life is. To try and put others ahead of myself, in appropriate circumstances, not always. 897-902

*Lena:* I think synchronicity is a good way to describe it. It's the indescribable, that's the problem...and it's the inexplicable. 594-597

*Howard:* There is something outside of us, and something that lives within us all because I've seen it through so many different people, people I love, people I don't like. 913-917

*Frances:* For me it's all spiritual. It's a practical spiritual programme. 507-508

*Christopher:* I liked the definition that I was given once, which was particularly germane to recovering alcoholic addicts, which was, 'If I don't take a drink or a drug today and I don't tell a lie that's about as spiritual as it gets.' 690-695

*Brian:* And then I've had, I've had some amazing experiences in sobriety, where I just think wow, something else is at play here. 430-432

### **The Higher Power**

*Valerie:* So I think in a way a higher power is my better self that is only accessed through using the AA programme and self-awareness. 152-155

*Lena:* It is going to be very much about me, but I don't think it's me, that's the whole point about it, it's not me, and it can surprise. 1471-1474

*Howard:* I think for me now the higher power is about the truth, it's about being authentic. 119-121

*Frances:* I think the higher power sometimes it's the fellowship, it's the people. 23-24

<i>Christopher:</i> Sometimes it's just the chair I'm sitting on. It holds my weight, and it... no matter what's going on in my head it's fairly sturdy.	4-7
<i>Brian:</i> Having a higher power, there's a door, there's a floor. So things may get bad, but I don't drop to that level. Like when I'm angry I'm just angry, I'm not in a rage. When I'm sad, I'm sad, but I'm not suicidal.	463-467
<b>Being and Recovery</b>	
<b>The Alcoholic Self</b>	
<i>Valerie:</i> What was more upsetting was the mean spiritedness than any of the sleeping around and nakedness and revolting behaviour and pretending my parents were dead when in fact I wanted to skive off with my boyfriend.	495-500
<i>Lena:</i> I was emotionally low, and this thing that had been so wonderful in my life and so much the best thing in my life for quite a few years, and the one thing that would make me feel better, stopped working.	264-268
<i>Howard:</i> What I've seen with a lot of people with addiction, they're so obsessed about themselves, it's always like, 'Me, me, me, me, me.'	573-576
<i>Frances:</i> Once I started drinking I could not stop until I was comatose and until I was in black out.	352-353
<i>Christopher:</i> I don't think my alcoholism was caused by any of the events that happened.	514-515
<i>Brian:</i> I also drank because I was messed up, and I lived in fear of being socially awkward, I couldn't have relationships with people.	61-64
<b>The Sober Self</b>	
<i>Valerie:</i> So big, nasty things in Val's little world have happened to me, and I've been able to deal with them and not even think about drinking, or taking a drug, or taking it out inappropriately.	600-608
<i>Lena:</i> It's really like, I think you stop using alcohol and drugs and all those deadening things, I just feel like, well it's just all so exciting.	697-700

<i>Howard:</i> I remember lying on the boat, looking up to the underside of this bridge, and thinking I was going to be sober for the rest of my life. And I was really happy. And I always knew that I'd be an old man and I'd be sober.	485-493
<i>Frances:</i> ... it's a very practical gift in a way, if you like, sobriety, it gives you this ability to manage your life without getting too uppity about it.	835-837
<i>Christopher:</i> Being honest. It's about being honest. And that 's why I think if I'm honest today then I won't need to drink, I won't need to drug, I won't need to shy away from what I need to do, no matter what others think of me.	984-989
<i>Brian:</i> At the beginning of sobriety it was so awful because there was nothing, it's not instant gratification, there's nothing that's going to be like, okay you've stopped drinking now, you feel good, it's something that you have to work towards, and it's something that builds.	69-75
<b>Well-Being</b>	
<b>The Courageous Self</b>	
<i>Valerie:</i> I sometimes say when I do chairs that I think probably the bravest thing I've ever done was to go to my first AA meeting. And to me that's personal courage.	1181-1184
<i>Lena:</i> You can kick me to death but you can't take my soul, because that's my gift, and that's to me.	1110-1112
<i>Howard:</i> It was a scary decision because it would be a life without alcohol and drugs. It was very, very scary even though it was giving me a lot of heartache, but it was familiar. Yeah, I guess it was courageous of me to do that. I guess it did take courage,	1132-1137
<i>Frances:</i> It takes courage sometimes to stay sober through very difficult occasions.	844-845
<i>Christopher:</i> Facing up to your demons. Facing up to everything you're scared of.	1028-1029
<i>Brian:</i> Well I think it's very courageous to face life on life's terms.	863-864

### **The Free Self**

<i>Valerie:</i> Striving not to worry about what's going to happen in ten years time.	560-561
<i>Lena:</i> I've got my own big picture, my own agenda that I want to follow.	403-404
<i>Howard:</i> So I've got that freedom to go into those places. I've got the freedom to embark on my life, to do the things that I've wanted to do.	946-949
<i>Frances:</i> Sometimes you can choose to be miserable or you can choose not to be.	895-896
<i>Christopher:</i> It gets you a place where you don't have to keep looking over your shoulder, going, 'Oh my god, I did it again. I've done something again.' It gets you to a place where you don't have to think you're a bad person, because you've gone against your received morals as opposed to your own moral code.	566-573
<i>Brian:</i> I think that when you have personal freedom, you have hope. And it's all these positive feelings that just add to the growth, add to the journey and just spur you on and make you want to go further.	748-752

### **The Centered Self**

<i>Valerie:</i> I believe you hear what resonates with you, and that's what I heard.	49-50
<i>Lena:</i> That's exactly the fear, when I came in, that I would lose myself, but it's just like polishing up a dirty diamond in fact, you just get rid of the stuff that's been imposed on you.	1142-1147
<i>Howard:</i> But when you start operating from the right place, in the right way, it's something that feels right to you.	152-155
<i>Frances:</i> It doesn't matter what they think of me, it doesn't matter.	257-258
<i>Christopher:</i> There's a thing on the back of the coin, 'To thine own self be true.' Shakespeare's quote, and yeah, it is about that.	992-995
<i>Brian:</i> And so always wanting people to accept me, like me, you know, all of these things that I wanted people to do but I didn't have any self-acceptance.	382-385

### **Understanding Being**

### **The Limited Self**

*Valerie:* It reminds me that there is something bigger and that my little world needs to slot back into the jigsaw puzzle and it's not the frame of the picture, it's just a small part. 574-578

*Lena:* This and that I can't do, but this I can do. 1060-1061

*Howard:* So it's the understanding that there is a lot that is greater than me. 376-378

*Frances:* To try and make something happen that cannot happen is deeply misery-making. 910-912

*Christopher:* And how can you fix it. There are some things that are just unfixable. And one of them is your humanity. 379-381

*Brian:* Part of working steps, a huge part is coming to believe, in a power greater than yourself. 582-584

### **The Surrendered Self**

*Valerie:* To the good thing, was nice. I didn't have any problem with handing over, I'd been handing over to the wrong things for years. 253-255

*Lena:* But letting go is when we suddenly get that wisdom. 1186-1187

*Howard:* Surrendering the compulsion, surrendering the desire. 1022-1023

*Frances:* It is a complete paradox, you let go and then sometimes things just happen. 134-135

*Christopher:* To get to that place of despair, and I suppose abject loneliness, you then can only reach out or die. 363-366

*Brian:* It's really interesting isn't it? I've never had such a life. Like I really have a wonderful full life now, and wherein, I exactly got that from handing it over. 917-920



## Appendix 8 – Table of Master Themes – Individual Participants

<b>Table of Themes – Interview 1 (Frances)</b>		
<b>Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being</b>		
<b>The Connected Self</b>		
Some weeks I don't go but I always keep in touch with people on the phone and so on.		399-400
So I got through with the help... I would never have got through without the help of other people.		786-788
You share it and they share back their experience about what they may have done in a very similar set of circumstances.		558-560
It's the fellowship as a whole, it's other people and what they say.		25-26
I fell in with all the right people for me who made it very simple for me		184-186
Being with others doing the same thing, doing the not drinking.		391-392
When the shit hits the fan, don't have a drink, go to the meeting, let people know what's happened.		923-924
Being with others and sharing with others....that's the thing that I find works for me.		420-421
My attitude somehow or other seemed to change because I was never a joiner, I was never a participant.		381-382
<b>The Responsible Self</b>		
It was about thinking I cannot keep relying on other people to look after me.		737-739
Yeah I think the old expression God helps those who help themselves. You get out there; you do what you can....		1029-1030

And I realised that actually the drinking was my problem, nobody else's.	335-337
.... and that's a thing in AA people always say get out there and take action.	1020-1021
I sort of thought, 'You've got to get work and you've got to grow up'.	735-736
Nobody else could take responsibility for my drinking except me.	342-343
I have to take responsibility for my own life.	732-733
 <b>The Empowered Self</b>	
....the ability to understand that you can manage, take control and manage your life with help and humility.	877-889
You accept where you're at in your life and.... if you can get real acceptance then you can move on.	128-130
Choices, that's the thing [ ] I have choices today	889-890
You make the plan and if something goes wrong you deal with it when it goes wrong.	288-289
....mostly you can change your circumstances, mostly.	889-900
It's the paradox and if you can let go of the power, the power of control then you get a kind of power back.	130-132
To forget about the impression you're making and to just be there and be with everybody else and do it.	529-531
....you didn't get sober to be this unhappy'. And I thought, no I didn't actually. So I took steps and resigned.	883-885
And by humility I don't mean humiliation	724
 <b>Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness</b>	
 <b>The Religious Self</b>	
The danger is when you think you've got a direct line to God.	635-636
What it meant for me I suppose, a force of tyranny.	461

That would make me God wouldn't it.... If I knew what God wanted....that would be very dangerous.	646-649
I've seen how much comfort people can get from it as long as they don't force it down other people's throats.	144-146
.... that would be very comforting if there was a nice benign presence sitting up there....as long as they were a nice person and not sending down evil bolts of lightning.	611-614
Look at politics and you think of recent events and people who spoke to God, that makes bad things happen, I think.	640-642
I love going into an empty church.	453
Now some other people....they will rest there, as it were, and they will feel quite content with.... the old God.	99-103
<b>The Spiritual Self</b>	
I suppose one way of saying it in shorthand, if you like, is trying to lead a good life.	501-502
It's very individual that's all, it's a completely individual thing for different people	60-61
.... to begin with I thought it was about.... thou shalt not [ ] because that's what I had experienced in the past.	537-541
.... I feel that fate took a hand, something came along and said, 'Okay, I'll help you out with this bit'.	1001-1003
Spirituality is about.... coming back to living comfortably with one's self.	524-525
It wasn't cut and dried and it isn't cut and dried.	56-57
Trying to lead a life where you do the next right thing, whatever that is, in any kind of circumstances.	503-504
For me it's all spiritual. It's a practical spiritual programme.	507-508
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
I think the higher power sometimes it's the fellowship, it's the people.	23-24

Yeah it helps you to live comfortably.	583
Usually for me it's when I'm in a place of absolute desperation that it works.	700-701
Well it's a power greater than myself.	19
To allow you to change, to take action....just to say help me today	756-757
Sometimes I have felt it within myself.	28
Sometimes it's very hard to pin down the higher power, for me.	98-99
But the higher power changes all the time, in a way, for me, all the time.	615-617
Sometimes I worry because I don't feel there is one.	63-64
I think it's made me more tolerant and less judgmental.	711

### **Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery**

#### **The Alcoholic Self**

.... blames other people and circumstances for the way they are, for their own unhappiness.	872-874
...and then the day came when I accepted you really are an alcoholic and you're going to have to do something about it.	179-181
For years as a drinking alcoholic I would never have talked to anybody.	574-575
I was a just pure and simple binge drinker.....I'd seen the havoc it had affected in my own life and in others.	162-165
Once I started drinking I could not stop until I was comatose and until I was in black out.	352-353
The thing about black out of course is you don't lie down gently and go to sleep, you're still on the rampage.	354-356

#### **The Sober Self**

.... it's a very practical gift in a way, if you like, sobriety, it gives you this ability to manage your life without getting too uppity about it.	835-837
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There's a difference between stopping drinking and getting sober, leading a sober life.	75-77
If I hadn't gone to AA and gotten sober I don't know where I'd be, maybe dead, maybe bonkers....	940-941
To let go of the obsession of self.	525-526
<b>Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being</b>	
<b>The Courageous Self</b>	
It takes courage sometimes to stay sober through very difficult occasions.	844-845
Finding things to do and taking chances and going out and doing things.	751-752
I think it takes personal courage to come to AA.	841-842
I just thought, you know, 'Christ, how am I going to get through...?' You know, and just do the next thing.	919-921
To recognise that you have a problem and that you are a fallible and flawed human being that takes courage.	842-844
Just getting through sometimes.	840
.... and not being a victim either.	867
<b>The Free Self</b>	
.... if you can change things then change things. And if you can't, find a way of living it.	898-899
People have to be allowed to find their own way. That's why I like AA because it is a broad church	149-150
Would you rent a room to somebody you can't stand who's annoying? No you wouldn't, so why give space in your head to that person?	589-592
What am I doing here? This is ridiculous, walk away.'	914
Sometimes you can choose to be miserable or you can choose not to be.	895-896

Yeah make the plans and let go. That's the thing. If you can do that, if I can do that, I lead a much easier life	282-284
What I find the best way to say it is not that I'm in control but that my life is more manageable.	818-820
So, I've got to take action about doing things.	747-748
 <b>The Centered Self</b>	
....acceptance, humility and gratitude. Those are the things that kind of keep one going.	722-724
It's about being able to live a normal quiet life and dealing with difficulties as and when they arise.	861-863
It doesn't matter what they think of me, it doesn't matter.	257-258
So, for me AA and normal living is a seamless thing between the two.	426-427
I've less of a chip on the shoulder and more relaxed about life.... more at ease.	810-812
....with all of the traits that make up my personality, to try and live comfortably with those.	312-313
 <b>Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being</b>	
 <b>The Limited Self</b>	
To try and make something happen that cannot happen is deeply misery-making.	910-912
This is an AA saying, progress not perfection.	520
.... accepting one's own limitations. Certainly yes.	729
I don't know everything, I don't understand everything, I don't know everybody's experiences.	83-85
To seek help, always to look for help, because that's the point.	573-574
.... a sense of pride has to go out that I can manage on my own thank you very much. I can't.	796-798

I, in desperation sat there and said, 'I don't know what to do'....when I came to the end of my drinking.	693-695
<b>The Surrendered Self</b>	
I surrendered to the help	781
It's letting go, it's letting go of the obsession of self.	251-252
I think what the higher power helps you with is to let go of that maddening desire to control everything	122-124
You look at the situation and you think there are people in place who can deal with things.	240-241
.... it is the easier thing to do, to let go, than to keep banging my head against a brick wall.	909-910
It is a complete paradox, you let go and then sometimes things just happen.	134-135
But this was just enough, I'd had enough, I couldn't do it anymore.	372-373
....a waste of one's own resources....one's own mental and spiritual energies.	587-588
....it is a daily thing really. If you can let go of a situation and let everybody else look after themselves.	198-200
To let go of things, to understand that bearing a grudge, having resentment.... is a complete waste of time	584-586
The shortest prayer is just help, let go.	233-234

## Table of Themes – Interview 2 (Valerie)

### Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being

#### The Connected Self

As soon as I think that I can do it on my own then I think I'll drink again. 978-979

That's when I know it's SOS, so I get on the phone and talk to my sponsor and if I can't get hold of her talk to somebody else. It's a bit like clicking your neck back into joint again.	995-999
If I have any craving for that sort of community, which I think a lot of people have and go for, I get it through the AA meetings.	352-354
To engage on a rigorously honest level.	1232-1233
If you're being authentic there will be people who knew you before who thought you were glamorous and fun and sexy, who actually find you a very dull specimen.	1087-1091
Their experience proved to me that if I used their collective understanding and the way they had managed.	33-35
So I look on it as something bigger than myself, for once in my life it's not me on my own trying to make stuff happen.	926-928
<b>The Responsible Self</b>	
It's my action, I have to put in the action.	985
Where the AA journey is leading me is that there has to be a certain amount of responsibility for your own thoughts and actions.	170-173
I also knew that this time around it was up to me to do it, nobody else was going to do it for me.	490-492
But this looking over the abyss and not drinking really resonated with me	1161-1162
But she doesn't mind what you do as long as you're willing to pick up the tab.	1366-1367
It's all about personal, accepting the consequences of your own actions and being able to look and say what they might be.	1381-1383
I've just done as hard as I can. I remember thinking when I came into AA, I want this more that I've ever wanted anything.	963-965
I had felt so powerless for so long. I wanted to feel that I could write a gratitude list, I could get on my knees, I could do service, I could step up and be responsible.	1273-1277



### **The Empowered Self**

Well it enables me to behave well and with dignity... it gives me a chance of operating like a decent person.	301-304
To me it's much more on a day to day basis, empowering me to not act out like a toddler.	320-322
I was going to have to examine myself and not blink.	492-493
It allows you to acknowledge that there is a struggle. And it allows you to realise that the coping mechanisms you started to adopt as a child you can't do as your life becomes more complex.	1066-1070
And that to me is the power of AA, I learn more about me and my recovery,	1149-1150
But it is the group; it's what I've learnt in AA. It's almost like filling up a battery of right thinking.	617-618
I know that there is this very depressive side of me, this drinking side of me, this ability to cause mayhem for myself and others, and maybe that's that part of that house, but I now have tools not to be pulled into it.	750-754
My grandmother used to say about the light of one small candle and it being bigger than all the darkness in the world, if I can keep that little light burning of this way of thinking, this way of behaving, this way of doing, and if I didn't interfere in it too much and trust in the outcome, then that little candle does... I know it flickers sometimes but I doesn't go out.	941-951

## **Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness**

### **The Religious Self**

I can't believe in God, I don't believe in it,	53
Being part of some established church or recognised church or recognised religion, which I have quite a mistrust of.	326-329
But I would love to be able to believe in heaven and meeting up with all my dead dogs and my father, and a lot of people I don't want to meet. But I don't believe in an afterlife as such.	336-340

I do believe in the basic promise, I think Buddhism, Hinduism, the Koran, the Bible, if you read all their basic texts without seeing how it's been interpreted by nutty zealots or crazy Irish priests I believe it's good stuff.	345-350
I wouldn't want to be part of a church.	351
I'm probably less tolerant of it. I have seen it cause trouble	359-360
I try to live a Christian life but with a small C.	392-393
That's one of the reasons I find it difficult to believe in a religious God, in that I couldn't really see what difference it made to God whether I got a job or I didn't when he should really be sorting out Afghanistan or something.	161-165
And so I was very frightened when I came in because I thought if you have to believe in God I can't.	54-56
And so whilst I do get down on my knees and pray I look on it more as a way of remembering it's not about me.	61-63
And so I did pray to a God as in group of drunks.	40-41
I do believe that there probably is... if there's going to be a clock there has to be a clockmaker,	329-330
<b>The Spiritual Self</b>	
And so I pray at night and in the morning. I don't know how far I believe I'm reaching any spiritual entity and how far I'm actually just going through the day and looking at my day ahead.	68-72
It's not something I chase after.	905
I see the spiritual side of it as being a direct outcome. I think it allows me to live what I believe the spiritual way of life is. To try and put others ahead of myself, in appropriate circumstances, not always.	897-902
It is odd that when I really do talk as if to an external entity, a spiritual entity, my answers come.	98-100
And so I feel there is a spiritual aspect to that but with a small S.	391-392

Very occasionally I get people saying, oh you seem comfortable within yourself, you seem to be very serene and very spiritual, and I don't see myself in that way at all, but maybe it's a side of you that comes out in spite of you.	442-446
I didn't do them to attain spirituality, I did it because I realised I needed an attitude change. So how far it's an attitude change or a spiritual change I don't know.	474-477
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
I think my higher power is the AA programme.	108
So I think in a way a higher power is my better self that is only accessed through using the AA programme and self-awareness.	152-155
You don't have to light candles. You can access your higher power every time you damn well want to and it's a channel. And you should leave it as open as you can, it's a valve, and it isn't just switched on on Sundays or switched on when you feel you need it.	649-654
It's an openness, it's allowing that channel to come in so you can access it and you can see the wood for the trees.	656-658
But it's different for all of us and that's why I believe it's such a powerful higher power.	1153-1155
The higher power enables you to deliver the demons.	1059-1061
I've heard people say that they look on it as a sea. Now I'm a stupid practical person, I can't understand how the sea could keep me sober.	916-918
The term higher power means to me basically the collective wisdom of the AA members who have stayed sober and gone before me.	23-25
It's another dimension I suppose.	426
I have to remember it's not me being the higher power.	851-852
We don't tend to talk about our relationships with our higher power. And I don't know why, but we don't.	1331-1333
I think because it's so important. You would never challenge anybody else's notion of their higher power.	1338-1340

It has to be a higher power, i.e. a God or the ocean or a group of drunks or whatever, and I don't care as long as you believe it's going to help you, was my attitude with my sponsees.	1312-1316
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## Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery

### The Alcoholic Self

So I was very aware that I was handing over my physical and mental health often to addictive substances and actually really rather bad men.	226-229
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I was very much a fuck it drinker. If the world let me down and I'd got my overdraft and I'd got this and I'd got that and all the rest it would be, oh, fuck it I'll have a drink.	277-280
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I had enough of a chaotic drinking experience to be aware that on a bad day I was trying to throw my life into the care of other people, whether it was unsavoury men....	189-192
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So if I do have a drink I want to carry on regardless [ ] and then my head will go everywhere.	893-896
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What was more upsetting was the mean spiritedness than any of the sleeping around and nakedness and revolting behaviour and pretending my parents were dead when in fact I wanted to skive off with my boyfriend.	495-500
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And I was also very aware that alcohol, nicotine, any drug I touched was also controlling the way I lived my life.	213-215
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I was aware that there was this dichotomy that on the one hand I would think, bastard how dare he control me, but on the other hand I didn't want to take any responsibility at all.	199-202
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That was all pretty shaming. The most horrible thing was how mean spirited I was to people I loved.	500-502
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So I knew I was actually very dependent on other people setting the context within which I lived my life and I resented that.	210-213
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### **The Sober Self**

And that there is a better self inside.	173-174
I am totally aware that I would not stay sober unless the AA programme was at the forefront of my mind	262-264
And then I can say to myself, come on, you're being completely self-centred, completely self-pitying, rather dishonest because you're not that bad for 49, and I can laugh at myself.	290-294
Dad died horribly of cancer. I found out [ ] was cheating on me. I got pregnant, we had a fight, he didn't want the child, I had an abortion. What else? I was in the tsunami in Phuket and that was very frightening. So big, nasty things in Val's little world have happened to me, and I've been able to deal with them and not even think about drinking, or taking a drug, or taking it out inappropriately.	600-608
I think if you're in AA the only way to stay sober, if you're a drunk, in AA terms I truly believe the only way to get well is through AA.	374-377
Interviewer: And this idea of the miracles and the miracle of the fellowship, do you see yourself as part of the miracle? Respondent: Yes. But not central to it. I'm part of the miracle for people who come in. So they'll come in and I'll be part of their miracle. Interviewer: So in that sense you are the higher power in that context? Respondent: I think we all are, but the sober part of it, sobriety is ...	703-712

## **Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being**

### **The Courageous Self**

I sometimes say when I do chairs that I think probably the bravest thing I've ever done was to go to my first AA meeting. And to me that's personal courage.	1181-1184
I think it takes huge personal courage to do your step 5.	1184-1185
But it takes a lot of personal courage to sit in somebody's living room and just tell them the poison that's been in your mind.	1220-1222
It takes real courage I think to really examine your past.	1247-1248
But it takes real courage to actually say this is how I was wired even before I	1251-1253

drank.

You go and do a chair and you don't know anybody in the room and there might be 200 people there, then it's the most personal story ever told. And that takes a fair amount of personal courage to do that because you are actually laying yourself bare. 1234-1239

But actually saying things like, I secretly hoped my sister would lose her baby because I'd had my baby aborted, is just horrible. And that takes real personal courage to admit that to another human being. 1213-1217

It took a lot of personal courage, as I say to say how mean spirited I was. 12092-1211

A real act of personal courage is to go to somebody who you trust to be benign and well meaning. 1204-1206

### **The Free Self**

Striving not to worry about what's going to happen in ten years time. 560-561

Stepping back and saying how serious is this in the grand scheme of things? 619-621

I believe that if you do it you should be able to take, not risk, but you should be able to fall in love and reckon the deep and if it goes wrong you'll be able to cope without drinking. 775-779

That is how I see the programme, as a safety net. So life events might knock me off the wire but there'll be a safety net bouncing and I'll go along and I'll climb back up again. 687-690

It gets rid of this complete self-obsession, this self-absorption going down endless blind alleys through misperceptions and dishonest, fuzzy thinking. 1010-1013

So I'm more open minded to the fact that I think in sobriety you change all the time, it would be dangerous if you didn't. 100-102

I like the bit in Shakespeare where it says, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of". 81-83

### **The Centered Self**

I believe you hear what resonates with you, and that's what I heard.	49-50
And if I'm having a tough time coping with stuff I will walk into that room and I'll sit down and the meeting will start, and suddenly everything will get back into perspective.	555-559
So I suspect that we don't use all the parts that we are, so I suspect that one's going into a place that one doesn't normally use. But I don't equate it with a God.	411-415
I feel closer to it when I'm at my home group. That's where I'm centred so that is probably a manifestation of the higher power.	552-554
No one in recovery is the same, and that's why everybody hears something different in the chair.	1159-1161
I do meditate, but I used to meditate at university anyway, so I believe in meditation as a mental exercise, as a way to relax, but I don't necessarily do it to try and access a God if that makes sense.	394-398
To me AA is a practical programme, it's a bridge to normal living.	389-391

## **Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being**

### **The Limited Self**

Yes I think the better self is the person who acknowledges that I am not the centre of the universe, that the world doesn't revolve around me.	158-161
It reminds me that there is something bigger and that my little world needs to slot back into the jigsaw puzzle and it's not the frame of the picture, it's just a small part.	574-578
I truly don't think that AA's are special and different in that way. I think everybody has all the same character defects. I think it's a matter of degree and how it's assimilated.	1261-1264
It's to remind me to be careful of the character defects that I very clearly still have, that I know that if I let them go unchecked will make me drink or will make me behave in an alcoholic way.	64-68
Recognising that they found a way to solve what I saw to be as a physical and mental illness that I suffered from.	28-30

### **The Surrendered Self**

To the good thing, was nice. I didn't have any problem with handing over, I'd been handing over to the wrong things for years.	253-255
The idea of handing over my will and my life to a benign power, who wouldn't expect very much in return if you see what I mean, wouldn't have to sleep with it or cook its meals or whatever, was actually enormously attractive.	230-234
It's surrendering every single minute of the day ..... and to me that is actually quite a big surrender because I have a huge ego.	863-867
I wanted to surrender to somebody. I knew I was surrendering to something that was killing me which was drink. So I was ready to surrender, I was so defeated.	1268-1271
It's like when you have a very good massage, and you've got that knot and it goes... it disappears.	818-821
The idea of doing it to the old fashioned notion of God that I had grown up with was terrifying because I didn't think I could believe in it.	234-237
I realised that I could hand over my will and my power to the principles of this programme, and try and live by this programme that I could see was a decent programme.	238-241
I thought it would make me unsexy, uninteresting, not very funny, and rather serious. But I was willing to accept that because I was so terrified of what I was doing to myself.	1106-1110

## **Table of Themes – Interview 3 (Brian)**

### **Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being**

#### **The Connected Self**

Well when I'm okay, I'm okay with other people. When I'm not okay, when I'm not doing well, I'm easily irritated. Or I don't want to be around anybody. I can isolate really easy.	324-327
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Because I just know that if things, I think somehow deep inside me now, I know things are going to be okay, because something's with me, I'm not alone.	471-474
So as I grow, if I'm in a really good space, and I'm feeling, you know, feeling really good, people are a positive thing.	333-336
I would get angry or really upset with somebody, and instead now I just see them as another spiritual being on their own journey.	688-691
I also grow spiritually through helping others.	371-372
I'm feeling good about myself, and all that's connected to my spirituality, and now I'm open I have great relationships with people.	347-349
<b>The Responsible Self</b>	
Because of course you've got to do footwork. It's not, you know, it's not about just like, oh here you go now, I'm going to sit here.	130-133
Well, okay, I'll use an example, like relationship status.... Now, it's up to me, to get out there and put myself out there. And so, if someone's going to come into my life, if I'm going to get help, or that person is going to come into my life, I need to be open for it, I can't just throw it in the box and then sit in my living room and think that someone's going to knock on my door, and I get out there, and be open for it to happen.	147-158
I think I was crushed when I came in those doors of AA, absolutely crushed, just broken in every aspect, just like depleted, suicidal and absolutely I had to build up myself from there.	415-419
I think a lot of the practices in AA are about taking responsibility. However, from the outside it could look as if it isn't	165-167
You have to have your feet firmly on the ground. So, it is this balance, balancing you know responsibility and also having faith.	170-173
And so you just, you give it up in a sense, but yet you're always going to have to do some footwork.	142-144
I think that maybe if a miracle happened, it was the fact that I got into a meeting, and I had that moment of clarity where I was like, I need help, I need to do something about this, I can't drink anymore, you know, whatever that was, but	182-188

since that moment it's been about choices and work.

I wasn't out there lying and stealing and contributing negatively to the world or to this energy, but I was out there putting it positively, and doing the best I can, not always doing great, but doing the best I can, and because of that, I'm having more positive of a life experience. 534-540

### **The Empowered Self**

I can actually go through a lot. I'd like to think I can go through anything. 886-887

Over years of being in AA, teaching myself to think, you know, to think a certain way. And I guess you could call it brainwashing yourself, but I like to think of it as I take my mind to the gym, and like I workout my mind, because if I'm sitting there, and I'm in a rut, and I'm having these awful thoughts go through my head, I snap out if it, I stop myself from thinking like that. 209-217

Faith in my own power, faith in myself. Yeah, faith in the higher power, but also faith in myself. 771-772

I think that's connected to my recovery growing, and just growing as a person. 372-374

I think I've done that all through spirituality. And so that's kind of been the key to unlock a lot of doors for me. 361-364

Well people attract well people, and so I believe that and by no means I'm not talking about ego, but I've done a lot of work on myself, and I feel like I'm in a healthy place, with lots of room to grow. 401-405

I actually have some curiosity, and excitement about the future. 851-853

## **Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness**

### **The Religious Self**

I had this fear associated with religion, because deep down I knew I wasn't adding up to everything I was supposed to add up to. 250-253

I had a bad, a traumatic childhood, and I remember being punished, and I was sent to my room, and I was waiting for more punishment, and I was standing there, and I don't know how old I was, like, but I remember vividly picturing God on a cloud, big man in a chair, beard, looking down on me. And I was just shivering, praying, asking that he would kill me so I could go to heaven.	287-295
I think my parents, instead of introducing me to the loving God, they introduced me to a fearful God to help them raise us. So we weren't out of control, you know?	262-265
I was raised with the punishing God, and I was threatened with God all the time.	246-248
And so it was a tool, a parenting tool. Religion was a parenting tool.	259-260
Really I think I was just suicidal from a really young age and didn't want to be here. And I didn't have a concept of taking my own life at that age. And I don't know, what at that moment, what God was, if he was sparing me or what not, I just think I just wanted to die.	304-309
<b>The Spiritual Self</b>	
I think it means ... trying to find some inner peace. And being open, it's definitely about being open.	311-313
Being on a spiritual journey has enabled me to like myself and accept myself.	387-388
I just do believe there's so much energy out there, like in the air, everywhere.	544-545
Actually I think now having faith is a strength, whereas before I would think it was a weakness. And I think really strong people seek out that, something, whatever it is for them.	272-276
And then I've had, I've had some amazing experiences in sobriety, where I just think wow, something else is at play here.	430-432
I think the literature keeps it very open for everybody to come in with their own belief system, and to develop it, or to have no belief system, and to develop that into whatever they see fit.	570-574

I do still believe that there's some type of connection, there's some type of spirituality.	638-640
So if you went around to everybody in the rooms and asked them what God meant to them, you would get a different answer from every single person.	563-566
I've often caught myself walking down the street saying it's going to be okay. And that's faith.	474-476
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
I have heard people who just have a really good experience of some sort and all of a sudden believe something drastic has happened to them, some white light experience, and all of a sudden they have faith. But mine wasn't like that; my kind of having faith in a higher power was developed over time. It started off very small.	87-94
Well I experience the higher power when I'm actually actively seeking my higher power.	423-424
I have a hard time deciding what it is, like if it's energy or what it is, but I also have another instinct that actually my higher power is inside. And I have that, because I think if I'm really silent, and I'm really in tune, meaning I just block out of the world, sometimes I intuitively know what to do, if I'm struggling.	651-658
Well it's just something that I played with in my head a bit, that maybe a higher power is energy. So, and I guess that's really hard to explain. But I just feel like there's energy out there, lots of energy, more energy than we know about. And that is taking a play in life.	511-516
I just get this sensation that's there's like a higher power there sometimes, and it's very comforting.	436-438
Having a higher power, there's a door, there's a floor. So things may get bad, but I don't drop to that level. Like when I'm angry I'm just angry, I'm not in a rage. When I'm sad, I'm sad, but I'm not suicidal. You know, so there is that catch for my emotions, I don't go as deep down as I used to.	463-469
I have a really vague concept of a higher power. I don't even know if it's energy or if it's the world	497-499

Yeah, because I could say I have faith in a higher power all I want, but it doesn't mean I do, and I doesn't mean I feel it down here.	83-85
So the term higher power means something bigger than I, to me, and I think it's evolved over time.	9-11
So we have respect for each other's higher powers, because we understand that this is of massive importance in our recoveries. So whatever you believe in, that's great, but believe it.	607-611
<b>Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery</b>	
<b>The Alcoholic Self</b>	
Well, I was sick, and I used drinking to medicate.	59-60
So stopping drinking, I was so raw, like I was naked with all of this fear, all of these anxieties, all of these social problems, and nothing to turn to, and I so that's where I was directed to AA.	64-68
Like if you think about my alcoholism as being a constant fight, where I, I'm in the ring, and I'm constantly getting knocked out, but I'm constantly getting up again, and that is my life, and this goes on for years and years, and people are watching it outside, horrified, and they're telling me to get out of the ring, but I won't surrender.	777-784
I tried a million different things to try to control my alcoholism oh, you know, I won't start drinking until six o'clock, or I'll drink beer, or you know, I'll try not to drink during the week or, you know, I won't drink hard liquor, you know, all of the million things that we can do.	785-791
Well it's painful to live life on life's terms sometimes. And it's, when you didn't do it for years because you were drunk all the time.	875-877
As an alcoholic I drank alone a lot.	327-328
I also drank because I was messed up, and I lived in fear of being socially awkward, I couldn't have relationships with people.	61-64

### **The Sober Self**

At the beginning of sobriety it was so awful because there was nothing, it's not instant gratification, there's nothing that's going to be like, okay you've stopped drinking now, you feel good, it's something that you have to work towards, and it's something that builds.	69-75
I think if I gave up practising living in the twelve steps, and gave up my spirituality that I have now, I would soon be consumed with darkness again. And ultimately that would lead me to a drink, because it's too painful to live like that.	239-241
There's a lot things I do to stay sober.	196
You just naturally start thinking more positive thoughts. Like I remember the first time I was walking and I just noticed how beautiful it was, or I noticed a bird in the sky, or I noticed things I'd never noticed before because I always had this dark cloud. So now, as I move on in sobriety it is about keeping that.	222-228
It's not just about staying sober anymore, it's about staying sane.	208-207
By successful sobriety I mean having some happiness in your life. Because you can quit drinking, alcoholics can quit drinking, and I know ... my uncle's a great example, he quit drinking but didn't work any program, and stayed miserable.	587-592

## **Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being**

### **The Courageous Self**

Well I think it's very courageous to face life on life's terms.	863-864
But there are uncomfortable times, there is, you know, there's lots of things that happen in life that aren't pleasant. But I have the courage to go through these times sober now.	881-885
And so to surrender something is like going against your natural instinct, and it's, so it was very courageous to let that go.	898-901
It took courage to do it, and it took more courage to continue. I'm really, really going to do this.	892-894

I'm able to walk into situations that require courage. Or I'm able just to walk with courage.	869-870
I have a lot of courage now. I think I ... and I think maybe I have courage that I'm not doing it alone.	865-867
<b>The Free Self</b>	
Sobriety has given me so much freedom, because before my life was just, I was just, not a victim, but I was a victim of my circumstances maybe, like I had no freedom, like I couldn't do that job because I drank all the time, I couldn't have that relationship because I was drunk all the time, I couldn't, you know there was no freedom, I was a prisoner, alcoholism just held me prisoner. And sobriety has given me so much freedom, because the only thing that's ever going to hold me back now is me. And that feels very good.	735-746
So, handing things over to the higher power, having faith has enabled me to be happy with who I am, which gave me personal freedom.	765-767
Personal freedom is the freedom to be me. But it's not just the freedom to be me, it's that I feel okay with who I am.	721-723
I think that when you have personal freedom, you have hope. And it's all these positive feelings that just add to the growth, add to the journey and just spur you on and make you want to go further.	748-752
And now I have personal freedom where I am who I am and I feel great about who I am, and I don't need to shove it down anybody's throat, and I don't need to, you know, go the opposite way and be less of me.	729-733
Instead of being in fear you're in excitement.	859-860
I guess the way it's changed, or the way I see life is that life to me is now more of an adventure.	832-834
<b>The Centred Self</b>	
It's about getting down those layers, seeing through your ego, seeing through your wants, and all that stuff, and just getting to the core, and it's like this little voice in there, that's like you've got whatever it is that will guide you.	658-663

And to feel good about myself, before I can have healthy relationships.	353-354
Spirituality is about working on myself, it's about getting inner peace but it's about being a better person, but I think it also has been about inner growth, about growing as a person. You know, finding some acceptance.	357-361
And so always wanting people to accept me, like me, you know, all of these things that I wanted people to do but I didn't have any self-acceptance.	382-385
<b>Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being</b>	
<b>The Limited Self</b>	
I'm the type of person that can get very anxious and if I am out there controlling everything or trying to just manipulate everything and worry about everything, I'll be in the hospital, because my body just can't deal with what that does to me.	109-114
I often want everybody to act a certain way, but that's not the case.	704-705
I just believe that everybody should come in and find a connection to something bigger than themselves, and that's really going to enable a successful sobriety, because life happens, death happens, friendships break up, people lose their jobs.	596-601
And that keeps me from going out in judgement. And keeps me from going out in anger. The way I don't want other people to be in judgement or anger with the way I live my life. So it's just about letting people be them. I definitely have discovered that through my spiritual growth. I never had that before.	710-716
Part of working steps, a huge part is coming to believe, in a power greater than yourself.	582-584
Well I have to have acceptance in my life, otherwise I'm not happy, so I need to accept other people for who they are, or how they're acting.	677-680
I can't keep fighting my boss, you know, as an example. I can't keep fighting a rule that I don't like, like there are things I can get to pick my battles, there's things worth it, and you know, I'll definitely get up there with the best of them and fight if I deem it necessary. But there are battles where I am not going to win, and is it worth my happiness? No.	806-813



I surrender myself to a higher power, in the fact that before, if I wanted something, and I was going somewhere, that was it. I was going to get it, and I couldn't see any other way.	832-838
<b>The Surrendered Self</b>	
It's really interesting isn't it? I've never had such a life. Like I really have a wonderful full life now, and wherein, I exactly got that from handing it over.	917-920
And so surrendering came when I was at the jumping off point, and surrendering has turned out to be the biggest, because it was like this [breathes deeply], funnily enough it was like the first deep breath I had since I started drinking.	791-796
So if I'm connecting with my higher power through thoughts, or prayer, and just handing over the daily troubles about somebody at work I want to throttle them, and I'm like help me, or help them.	425-430
And no, okay, this is a battle I'm going to fight, or no, we're moving on, let's surrender this. The one word I connect with surrender is peace.	822-825
Surrendering is such a, it was an awful thing before, in that weakness and it meant, it just meant weakness.	775-777
It's peace. It's sheer peacefulness, it feels wonderful.	827-828
I would say the one word I connect with surrender is peace.	824-825
I had the same sensation from surrendering. The exact same sensation, oh, the fight is over, and it felt so, so good. The years of battling. And now it's something different in my life, like there's certain things I'm not fighting anymore.	800-805
Like I think I've felt so good about myself and life at times, and it's almost like it's, it's almost like it's been given to me.	432-435

## Table of Themes – Interview 4 (Howard)

### Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being

### **The Connected Self**

Because I think sometimes in life, when you're a bit messed up, and you don't have any belief in yourself, if you haven't got that connection to a higher power, then I think the people carry you, the meetings will carry you. 425-430

You go into a room of alcoholics, and you walk in there and you're totally disillusioned, with just life, and then you'll hear something completely amazing, 71-74

And I remember that, there was something about that room which always kept me coming back. There was a whole bunch of guys there who I had nothing in common with, they were a lot older, but there was just a lot of love in the room. 279-286

I get elevated by nature by being by the sea, but I get more elevated by people. 549-551

And then about seven weeks ago there was a guy who was doing the chair, who was doing the talk. And he wasn't someone I particularly warmed to, but what he said, he just sort of... there was a spirit in the room. There was the connection that every single one of us, we were all connected. 83-90

There have been long periods where I've just felt as if I was on my own. And that's not a really good place to be in, because I've been on my own before and felt as if... there's been a disconnection, and then there's been times when I've felt more connected. 840-846

Also what stopped me was having commitments in AA, and having friendships in AA. 412-414

### **The Responsible Self**

So it's just about you as a person trying to do the best you can do. 874-876

Yeah, it's just that some people say, 'I just handed everything over.' I just think, well, what do you then do? You're just sitting there and waiting for something to happen? 347-351

But a lot of people say just... you know if you've got a situation you just throw it over to a higher power and they'll sort it all out for you, just let it go. But that never ever worked for me because I always thought, you know what, I need to put the footwork in. 194-200

I think it's like, you get your life, God gives you your life, so you come, you're born 762-771

into this life, and you've got your choices, and some people will, every choice they'll say, 'Oh God, give me a sign. Am I making the right decision? Give me a sign. Give me a sign.' Other people will say, 'God, just be with me.' And I'm saying God, but it's higher power, just be with me.

I need to do my own... make my decisions and trust that the decisions I'm making are healthy for me and not screwing someone over, so that's what I've always operated in. 200-204

And you go in, you do your work, your selling, and you're making all the decisions but you know you've got your higher power there, like a parent looking after you. 771-775

I went to AA because I knew the drinking wasn't good. 276-277

I'm one of those people where because I've always had to do everything myself, make all the big decisions, that thing of turning everything over to a higher power, it's quite a difficult one to answer. 325-330

### **The Empowered Self**

You get sober, you go to AA, you develop your sense of a higher power. And that opens up a lot of doors for you. 954-956

It was just like every one had that freedom just to say what was on their chest, and get it out, and because people were telling the truth and talking from the heart there was just this amazing energy in the room. 106-116

Now that I go to AA and I have my higher power, I can go to places where I just couldn't go to before. 940-942

I think it's me. I think how I see it is we all have our own lives, and you have to then find out what actually makes you happy. 918-621

In every way, it's empowered me. Because I'll go into situations which used to baffle me. There would be situations no way I could go into. 1054-1061

Well you see them like, they do things which maybe they wouldn't do before. They embark on life changes which there was no way they'd have been able to do before. 926-929

But if it was something that was threatening my life, and threatening my emotional security then I would change it, but there's some things you just think, you know what, you just weight it up and you think, okay, maybe... 660-665

And yeah, I started talking to myself, and after about an hour I felt great again. Where if I didn't have that and just had that, you're running the show with that negativity, then that's not a good place to be.	861-865
It's really helped me empathise with other people, which has been a really, really good thing to do, rather than before it was always like me, me, me, me. And now I can actually empathise with other people. So it's really been a huge blessing.	1069-1074
<b>Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness</b>	
<b>The Religious Self</b>	
It was nailed into me. But I never ever had a connection, I'd go to church, I'd be sitting in the church and I'd be listening to the priest with his sermons, and it just went in one ear and out the next.	536-540
I grew up in a very strong religious background. So all of my looking out, up to heaven and things and praying to God, and the man with the beard, and then the devil was in the bottom of the earth and things like that, you know the typical religious upbringing.	25-31
I've got lots of friends who are priests who are really, really good people, but there's so much abuse within religion, and not just the Catholics, every religion you see there's so much badness within it. But it's the badness of the people; it's not actually about the teachings.	523-529
I was the alter boy, I was in the choir, I did all the stuff, we'd go to church every Sunday, and it was like a fear driven God.	505-508
I look at Muslims, the Jewish culture, so all different cultures, and I just see there's so many fantastic things about them. And I just see the sadness of the right wing side of all of them that just causes so much trouble.	896-901
Being gay. Because I had that religious upbringing, being gay was taboo in my religious upbringing.	869-871
I feel sad for people who have got religion without a higher power.	518-519
I think the teachings are lovely, and they're healthy and they'll elevate people, but a lot of the scriptures they're just open for interpretation from bad people. So religion and I do not mix.	529-533

The religion as in the Pope sense, because if the Pope was to walk into this flat today I would slap him, because I think he's a nasty piece of work.	519-523
<b>The Spiritual Self</b>	
What I see as being spiritual is just someone that's good, just someone that does the right thing. You treat someone the way that you want to be treated.	677-680
And especially in the winter time because the sun sets on the horizon and there's just something about it, and I feel more in connection, strongly, when I'm by the sea, with the higher power.	260-264
Maybe I go to an AA meeting and I might hear someone who's really struggling, and they've just got a spirit around them.	68-71
It's just more of a rigid thing with a lot of people, when they're spiritual, it's as if they're beating themselves up.	703-706
I'd go to AA and I'd be hearing people's life experiences and it's going straight to my heart, it's going straight into my body. And that should have been the stuff I should have got as a kid growing up.	540-545
There is something outside of us, and something that lives within us all because I've seen it through so many different people, people I love, people I don't like.	913-917
You see things which are quite remarkable, which I've never, ever seen with people who study or who have got a religious upbringing	919-923
Yeah, because if you give out you actually receive it back.	585-586
Some places I go to, and I'll feel there's a presence there, I feel there's an energy there. There's other places I go to and I feel there's a real negative energy there. It's just like a... it's not something you see it's something you feel.	240-247
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
And it's changed again, it's more about me now, so as if I became spirited and I'm more my higher power.	19-21
I think for me now the higher power is about the truth, it's about being authentic.	119-121
I've gotten sober. Where before when I first got sober the higher power was more of a religious symbol, like God, your spirit guide, and as I've gotten older in	43800

recovery it's been more fluid where it's not so much the religious connotation it was more sort of nature, and then more of people, more of sort of a spirit.	
I was taught that the higher power will love you unconditionally. It doesn't matter about sexuality, it goes beyond all that.	871-874
I think, by embarking on it, it's actually elevated me up the ladder and it's made me the guy who I am today.	1050-1052
I've always said, down the years, that everyone should have a higher power, and just chuck all the religions and let people develop their own sense of a higher power.	905-909
So, I've always had a belief that there is a higher power, but what it was when I first got sober to what it is today is completely different.	34-37
I just felt that the higher power, even though I believed it but there was still a little bit that I was a bit scared about, and scared to trust it completely fully.	185-189
Then why not if they're happy with a God that's of their understanding. I would like the same respect for my higher power, the God of my understanding.	819-822
Sometimes as well with your higher power, sometimes you get a stronger connection and other times you don't get a connection and other times you think, shit maybe there's no such thing as the higher power. So it's like fluid.	825-830
<b>Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery</b>	
<b>The Alcoholic Self</b>	
When I first came into AA my life was about partying, drinking, going out with the hottest guy, and... none of it ever felt... it felt good that there was something, but it was as if I was denied the best part.	270-274
What I've seen with a lot of people with addiction, they're so obsessed about themselves, it's always like, 'Me, me, me, me, me.'	573-576
Then I started questioning the whole thing of, am I an alcoholic, am I not? Da de da de da. Anyway I took a drink on my ninth anniversary, and I came to realise that, yeah, you're definitely an alcoholic. The way I drank, what happened that night....	466-472

They had all the great stuff but I just really couldn't enjoy it.	275-276
Before, when I was in my drinking days I was fairly stunted, because I didn't think that I could do these things, because I was drinking.	949-952
Whether it's a room full of people, whether you're sitting in a room full of alcoholics and you take part, or if you're washing the cups and putting the tables back, it's about getting out of yourself.	578-582
There was times when I just couldn't stop drinking at all.	938-939
<b>The Sober Self</b>	
I remember lying on the boat, looking up to the underside of this bridge, and thinking I was going to be sober for the rest of my life. And I was really happy. And I always knew that I'd be an old man and I'd be sober.	485-493
Now that happened years and years and years ago, and that still uplifts me. That, how can that woman get from the street shooting up drugs and just being a complete self-destruct get to become sober, to go through school, to go through university, and to become a doctor?	563-569
Those people in AA, those friends you've got in AA, if it's only for the friendship providing you stay sober then, you know what? Fine.	476-479
I think the ones that have stayed sober the longest and the ones that seem to be happy are the ones who don't really talk about the higher power, but you know they're got a higher power, but they're not ramming it down people's throats.	802-808
I got sober, I got to realise that actually you can have a god of your own understanding.	510-512
<b>Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being</b>	
<b>The Courageous Self</b>	
I see it as being a courageous act.... because there were two roads I could have gone down. I could have gone down the AA road or I could have gone down the road of just drinking and having that lifestyle where you're selling yourself short, you're suffering by your drinking and drugging.	1121-1129

It felt right, it felt the right thing to do, for me. And I had to take the courage because I left a job which paid great money, I lost a lot of friends because I went to work for myself, and there was a lot of shit that happened, but I just hung on there and just... so I had the courage to do that.	1086-1095
Chatting to the higher power gave me the courage to say, you know what, I don't want to do this job I'm doing, I've not enjoyed it for many, many years. I could stay here for indefinite but I'm not going to be happy here.	110-1105
It was a scary decision because it would be a life without alcohol and drugs. It was very, very scary even though it was giving me a lot of heartache, but it was familiar. Yeah, I guess it was courageous of me to do that. I guess it did take courage,	1132-1137
<b>The Free Self</b>	
I feel that when I'm being authentic I'm more elevated, because I'm not operating from that ego place, or that place of being feared up in case of what you think of me.	124-129
So I've got that freedom to go into those places. I've got the freedom to embark on my life, to do the things that I've wanted to do.	946-949
But as I've got sober and longer into recovery I started seeing that actually I don't believe in the stuff that I was brought up with.	31-34
To create your own path and to be authentic.	654-655
It's really opened me up to see, what we've got in today's society where we've got that fear about different cultures and the Muslims taking over and Christianity dwindling away and it's all fear, fear, fear.	891-895
There's so many people who are just scared to actually say what they want, because they might think that by ordering such and such they might upset the host.	636-639
You go to AA meetings and you hear all different people's experiences, so they all have a different take on it. And you'll have a different take on it, and what's fantastic is, the healthy way that I see is, you live and let live.	790-795
And I think what's happened to me, what has really, really helped me, is that thing of, I can actually tell you today what I want. Where for years I didn't.	647-650



Where what I had before was like God, if you looked at, had sex with or fancied a guy you'd be burning in hell. So that was a liberation.	882-885
<b>The Centred Self</b>	
But when you start operating from the right place, in the right way, it's something that feels right to you.	152-155
I think as you get late thirties, forties you become a bit more, a better friend to yourself, where it doesn't matter if that person doesn't like you, it doesn't matter if that person doesn't want to give you the job, or doesn't want to knock around with you.	137-143
Another thing that I've realised is we're all so uniquely different, where what might be good for me might not be good for you, and vice versa.	156-159
And when I don't validate myself because I can still fall into that trap of, you know, seeing someone I fancy, trying to manipulate it that they fancy me, and operating from not the right code, and you end up getting yourself burned again.	147-152
And if there's something I do that doesn't feel right then I feel that I'm just not operating from a good space.	612-614
So I think it really comes down to your essential beliefs.	160-161
I went to Scotland a few weeks ago, and I was with my brothers and sisters, and none of them could make a decision. It was like, 'What would you like?' 'Oh I don't mind.' It was like, 'Tell me what you'd like.' 'Oh I don't mind. What are you having?'	621-627
<b>Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being</b>	
<b>The Limited Self</b>	
Yes. Well... my thing is, I cannot live my life on this planet today without a higher power. I need to have something bigger than me, because if I start running the show...	229-233
We're actually taught that you need to look at something bigger than me, me, me.	576-578
Just like you know what, you get your life, and if you're lucky you get to the other	220-224

end of it being an old man and being in good health but there's nothing there it's just a crock of shit.	
It helps me to run my life, having a sense of my higher power, something bigger than me. And if I don't have that sense, then I feel, what's it all about?	233-237
So it's the understanding that there is a lot that is greater than me.	376-378
I'm taking care of myself, but I feel as if there's a power bigger than me looking after me.	751-753
<b>The Surrendered Self</b>	
You surrender to the fact that you don't want to have the obsession for alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, whatever.	1008-1011
Sometimes I make the decisions. And then sometimes I think, was that the higher power that gave me that thought to make that decision to do that or whatever. Sometimes it's quite fluid and grey.	366-370
Surrendering the compulsion, surrendering the desire.	1022-1023
Well I think it's actually made me a stronger guy. It's funny actually because you surrender to something and you think you're going to give all your... you're going to become passive, and they're going to be in control. And it's actually the other way about. You surrender but you end up being in control of your life.	1031-1038
So you just have to get on with it, and then you just say, 'Right, God, I need your help. I'm just handing it over to you.' But at the same time you're going about doing your thing.	315-324
So there's been lots of times down the years where I've felt, I've said my little offerings up and I've been taken care of.	744-747
Please help remove the desire for alcohol from me, and help me just be the best man I can be and then you just let it go, and then you get on with your life.	1012-1016

## Table of Themes – Interview 5 (Lena)

### Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being

### **The Connected Self**

There is a sense of fellowship when I'm in meetings.	503-504
I'm told that I have to stay in touch	475
But when I came in then the attractiveness of the people in there, and I just got this...	284-286
I might just hear somebody saying a very similar scenario and how they got out.	1035-1036
Because by and large the people who, well, in a practical sense it makes me feel more human, because these are my people. They're people like me.	485-488
It's a bit like the England game [ ] they played rubbish, then something happened, and they can't talk to each other, they're not radio connected. Something happened, where they suddenly all started to behave as different footballers... and it's that something that does happen in AA meetings maybe more than in other places.	572-589
When I can't see my way out of the woods, I talk to people that I trust.	1033-1034
I was really taken by just the odd lines of spiritual things and stuff like that, although I never would have joined it because then I'd be one of those creepy people.	280-284
And that was maybe somebody I've never met before, am never going to see again, but we talk so openly, and that lets me out of my personal prison because they got out of theirs.	1036-1041

### **The Responsible Self**

It's solve your problem, come up with a solution, but to me that totally fits in with AA.	441-443
There's a Jewish joke about Murray praying to win the lottery, and suddenly he hears his voice, and God says, 'Murray, meet me half way, buy a ticket.'	393-397
Think back to that Serenity Prayer. But it's more complicated. You'd think it was simple, when you know that prayer, well then fine, you do that and everything's...	1176-1180
I'm going to cross the road in a rubbish way and maybe get run over and killed, and that was meant to be. I can't do that far on the surrender front. And that's not	433-439

how I interpret AA.	
And there's also a Quaker expression, 'Pray but move thy feet.' It's not that I just sit there, I'm not a puppet, I'm born with common sense and intelligence, and I am meant to use that.	397-402
...it is through practical application. Once I accept that I'm not controlling the whole thing, but I should do my practical thing.	1202-1205
I just think, if I'm privileged enough to be white and educated and middle class and capable of affecting the situation then that's what I have to do.	1392-1395
It's interesting, because it's all about that doing... pray but move thy feet, and practical, it's getting that right balance.	1187-1190
<b>The Empowered Self</b>	
I have the right change.	1225
It was a permission to believe.	287-288
They're people like me who relate that they were tense and screwed up before and they're clearly not, evidentially not like that now.	506-509
I don't feel so limited now. And it is that thing, the wisdom to know the difference.	1057-1059
You clear up the wreckage of your past.	877-878
I'm a terrible victim of fear, of terror. That's what I didn't talk about before I came in, just feeling frightened all the time, and it's helped with that because I don't feel so frightened.	1069-1073
And so I think there is a paradox there; that I feel smaller in relation to it, and that gives me more ability to enjoy, and to maximise my own life actually.	718-721
The belief that there's no reason why I shouldn't be able to be happy and achieve the things that I want to achieve.	1061-1063
AA is a solution-based programme. That's what I love about it, it's solution-based.	443-445
I can't change it that I'm at the top of the burning building, and that the building is on fire, but I can change that I'm in the burning building by jumping onto the mattress.	1373-1377

## Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness

### The Religious Self

To me it feels intrusive, and almost like rape, when someone is telling me how to interpret God.	831-833
I suppose that's why I don't really like personification of God, because I think how dare you, Joe Shmo, paint a picture of God for everybody.	1461-1464
Boring, staid, and judgemental, and yeah, they weren't the fun people in the family.	225-227
I think that God wants us to go for it, and I don't think he likes things boring and petty and small, I think he likes things dramatic.	125-128
I don't subscribe to the view ... that I have this superior relationship, what I call the George Bush view, that oh, I have a hotline to God.	346-349
I think God's all about common sense.	1218-1219
I do see God as an artist, if you like a creator.	1458-1459
I find that a little disturbing when people claim to have two-way conversations with God... I'm not expecting an answer back.	843-847
I thought that God stuff was a little bit creepy before I came in.	193-194

### The Spiritual Self

I Had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.	897-898
I think there is a particular energy in Alcoholics Anonymous.	565-567
But it wasn't my plan, my picture. Perhaps that was a spiritual moment but it was far more prosaic than I would have chosen it to be.	1533-1536
It was a raising of consciousness, a moment of magic, when he wasn't thinking. He suddenly got it. That's what an epiphany is.	674-677
When I used to think too much about God I think I was much less close to him.	298-299
There's something about excepting but not knowing?	37-38
I do think that we're sometimes given a little extra help, and I can't explain that.	1294-1296

Because my spiritual moment then wasn't meant to be that big, glorious, me and nature and everything, it was actually meant to just be just talking to an old woman.	1526-1530
But when he said that, that raised my spirits, and I felt like I was in the dell with him.	552-554
I think synchronicity is a good way to describe it. It's the indescribable, that's the problem. It's the indescribable. [Laughing] And it's the inexplicable.	594-597
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
There are as many members in Alcoholics Anonymous as there are interpretations of God or the higher power.	544-546
It allows you to have your own personal experience of God.	803-804
For me, a supreme and benevolent creative force, which is something I don't understand, but I feel that I know exists.	11-14
It is a creative force... and we use the word creative to describe art... and I think it is like really vast and glorious and exciting.	103-107
It is going to be very much about me, but I don't think it's me, that's the whole point about it, it's not me, and it can surprise.	1471-1474
The literature is very cleverly and wonderfully written in that it really leaves it open to you, and doesn't force interpretation on God.	790-793
I think I projected a more petty vision onto the higher power earlier on.	49-50
Maybe the higher power is always a projection of ourselves.	79-80
I feel that since I accepted the higher power I've got a better sense of humour.	1476-1477
I don't think that we could be made by a machine or the Big Bang, so that's why I believe in a higher power.	379-381
<b>Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery</b>	
<b>The Alcoholic Self</b>	
I had a moment of truth or epiphany or whatever and I suddenly realised that the	237-240

drink was in control of me and I wasn't in control of the drink.	
I was very, very depressed. Just a few months before stopping my drinking.	235-236
That was that awful... awful, awful low state, negative feeling about myself, about the planet, about other people, just a horrible discussion in my head, like a labyrinthine thing.	459-463
I am like a very hungry person, and I like big drama, big stimulation, big, you know... Which is what I think I was looking for in my life of drugs and alcohol.	693-696
I was emotionally low, and this thing that had been so wonderful in my life and so much the best thing in my life for quite a few years, and the one thing that would make me feel better, stopped working.	264-268
Actually, ego is misery. When I'm in a bad space...	729-730
Because we're so driven with our own agendas, he was driven with his agenda, he was going to get to that park with the beers.	653-655
Obviously that may be my projection because as an alcoholic, or this alcoholic, likes things dramatic.	146-148
...like, it's all about what I want, and things are going wrong for me, and they're not doing what I want, and stuff like that, so then really I become my whole universe. That's miserable.	732-736
<b>The Sober Self</b>	
Well on a practical level I go to meetings. I think that helps maintain my sobriety.	471-473
It's just an ongoing path and I hope that more will be revealed.	1004-1006
Sober I can appreciate that, and I feel like it's all just there for us to enjoy. Or experience anyway.	173-175
It's made me happier, and more relaxed. And given me more energy. And made me healthier.	907-909
I respect somebody else's thing.	161
It's really like, I think you stop using alcohol and drugs and all those deadening things, I just feel like, well it's just all so exciting.	697-700

## Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being

### The Courageous Self

You can kick me to death but you can't take my soul, because that's my gift, and that's to me. 1110-1112

It's thinking it's the right thing to do so I will be protected. 1338-1339

I'm not going to be stabbed because I'm doing the right thing, and there'll be something looking after me. 1340-1342

That doesn't mean to say it can't be absolutely miserable and horrible. It's like the difference between a soap opera and a Greek tragedy. The Greek tragedy is going to have worse things happening in it probably, but it's going to be more glorious. 982-987

Freedom is a gift. Which no one can take away, no human power can take away. 1128-1129

### The Free Self

I've got my own big picture, my own agenda that I want to follow. 403-404

I enjoy it when I feel that I have personal freedom. And I don't enjoy it when I feel I don't have personal freedom. 1019-1021

I feel now that even if I was in terrible, terrible circumstances, I would at least be able to access that wonder a bit. 1081-1083

I have to remind myself that I'm free, a lot, and I can feel not free a lot of the time. 1024-1026

I think I have self- imposed things where I don't feel free. 1027-1028

I'd rather be an inmate than a guard, because that person's in real, permanent hell, whereas the inmates are in imposed hell. 1095-1098

It's all just such a big adventure and exciting, and it's there for a reason, and it's just a different way of looking at things. 966-969

Then I will do the right thing, and I will be, hopefully, successful... So it's about being natural if you like. 385-388

Rather than thinking society says that tramp's ugly, or that person is disabled and disgusting and deformed, I don't know, whatever, but now just looking at them, 969-974



maybe they're just different looking, and it's quite interesting.

### **The Centred Self**

You discover yourself more and more. And feel more content then. And if I feel 1149-1152  
I'm alright I feel you're alright.

It's the little voice inside. 1257

If I was in the worst possible scenarios, concentration camp, something like that, I 1085-1089  
think there are people in that situation who could still access moments of joy and wonder.

I believe that we're all created, or I'm created as this unique individual. 377-379

I feel like if I was in that situation my mind would be free. 1099-1100

I think that because through more acceptance of the way things are and 925-928  
everything I think I'm better at interacting with other people.

That's exactly the fear, when I came in, that I would lose myself, but it's just like 1142-1147  
polishing up a dirty diamond in fact, you just get rid of the stuff that's been imposed on you.

You'll only have your sole stolen if you let it, but I know that now. 1135-1137

I feel like it's mine (her mind) ... and I feel like I could hermetically seal it, and I 1100-1103  
certainly wouldn't have felt that before.

## **Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being**

### **The Limited Self**

I sort of feel in a sense that I understand more now, but also less. 34-36

But I'm not in charge of what other people do, I'm not trying to control them, I just 939-941  
accept that they're them.

This and that I can't do, but this I can do. 1060-1061

...and Dickens wrote about it... he said the magnificence of these big buildings 712-718  
made you realise how small you were.

...and then it's recognising that little voice inside that says, okay, this is not the 1206-1208

day to buy the lottery ticket.	
It's like when I get into that I'm responsible for other people, I'm responsible for their happiness.	1167-1169
I don't think that I have some special connection with God, that you don't have or somebody else doesn't have.	351-354
I think that I used to assume more knowledge than I do now.	25-26
<b>The Surrendered Self</b>	
We have the think, think, think, sign upside down.	626-627
I couldn't get me sober. I couldn't stop, that's what I realised before I came in, and it just, it's really difficult to explain, it's just that it's... all I can tell you is that it's... okay, I can't do it.	312-316
I can make myself miserable, and maybe I get to the shop and it's closed, I can make myself miserable truly believing that this is the day that if I brought that lottery ticket I would have become a multimillionaire. Or I can go, clearly I was not meant to have that lottery ticket.	1233-1239
But letting go is when we suddenly get that wisdom.	1186-1187
It sometimes feels like... well, it's like jumping out of the burning building, that would be the best example of totally handing yourself over to the higher power.	1401-1404
It's just I can't do this on my own, there has to be... It's just like I want to turn my brain off. And surrendering means just turn my brain off and see what's going to happen.	1156-1160
That's why I believe in a higher power. And I think that when I relax and I surrender, and I don't try and control it with my brain...	381-383
I allowed the higher power to do it.	322
...then I will do the right thing.	385-386

## Table of Themes – Interview 6 (Christopher)

## Superordinate Theme 1 – The Challenge of Being

### The Connected Self

I have to connect, I have to... Because otherwise I just don't get the chance to... of myself I am nothing. 1036-1039

For me specifically as a recovering alcoholic it's the bond between myself and one other recovering alcoholic. 36-39

It's called Love Dogs and it's about finding that the connection between a dog calling for its master, it is the connection, that calling is the connection, that whining, whether you get an answer or not is immaterial, it is the actual act of calling. It's the bond. So I think it's... yeah, it's that bond between me and another human being. 56-64

...and through getting to know them a little better I could actually define a bit more about who I was. 317-320

To be together, yeah. So there's always that. And that's very, very powerful I think. There is no need for definition in that link. It just is. 1060-1063

... and doesn't stop them striving for a link with others no matter how tenuous or fragile or disturbed that link is, and within that I think there is the power to come to a place of peace. 271-275

And this one other?... One other human being. It's the connection. 16-18

No matter what is going on, whether you're Raoul Moat or the guy who was in Cumbria who I can't remember the name of now who shot all those people. I think there is a place that within that link there is that possibility that one human being can touch another and they can both come out of it better off. 275-283

Well, with the help and guidance of at least another individual who knows me, and I know, and I trust, and I want the peace that I see them having. 873-876

I think it's about, with you I can walk through something. With you I can... we can walk through it together, but on my own... And it is really just about having that link, that reaching out, because it doesn't mean that I physically have to walk with you. 1043-1049

### The Responsible Self

My job was to turn up and do the work, and do it well.	448-449
There is a moral code that I think we're all born with to a greater or lesser degree, or that we will all strive for, and within that there is a place of peace.	104-108
The programme is spiritual. It's about doing the work, it's about thinking of others, it's about seeing outside of yourself, it's about being in a calm, reflective place which can be of use.	711-716
To walk through it, yeah. And the only way I do that is to move.	1032-1033
But that's alright. Actually, it's about me doing the work and actually all the other situations become based on it.	892-894
I had somebody the other day saying that their first memory, at four years old was one of worrying about what life was all about, which at four years old seemed a bit heavy. But yeah, I think there is that. You're struggling all the time to get a grasp on what this thing is.	207-213
Well, I plan bits of my life. I just don't have any control over the outcome. I plan to go to Cardiff. And work tomorrow. I don't know what the outcome is of that. I've got no idea whether I'll make it there or not make it there or whatever and it doesn't really matter.	388-394
Just be who you are today. And do that. And do that to the best of your ability and don't hurt anybody else.	1102-1104
The fact that stuff happens and people are both good and bad, and people make mistakes and foul up and that doesn't stop them striving.	267-271
I have to take responsibility for my part and just deal with that.	901-902
You have to do certain things because otherwise it becomes visceral.	359-360
<b>The Empowered Self</b>	
I still worry but I worry less, and it's not all consuming.	881-883
It's the connection between one human and another. It's not definable. It's the strength that comes out of that.	21-23
It's facing up to self. Doesn't mean I necessarily like it all the time.	549-550
From the moment I knew, which I suppose was about a year before becoming sober, that I was a gay man, it became untenable to keep waking up and thinking,	959-966

'Why am I here again?' I could carry that on for life, and please everybody else.	
What other people think of you is none of your business, that's their business. So I leave that with them. I have to do what I think of me.	938-941
I retain the right to choose. Not to judge.	157-158
I can put something to one side and go, okay, I 'm going to leave it in your care, because it's sending me nuts now and I have no control over it.	883-886
It's saying I'm human, and not all the stuff that my ego says, whatever you want to call it.	600-602
So the only way to get that is to have that link between me and others, where I gain some perspective where I gain some knowledge.	470-473
Acceptance of who I am, what I am. So as long as I'm really honest.	1009-1010
<b>Superordinate Theme 2 – Being and Otherness</b>	
<b>The Religious Self</b>	
The practices of most major religions tend to bring in the prejudices and egos. [Says angrily] The Pope just... comes and tells that person this is right or this isn't right. I'm tired of encyclicals; tired, please stop, you know. Who are you? You know.	673-679
Religion is just repeated ritual.	159
So life is fragile. And if it was some big theistic God that was controlling it all, well I have difficulty with that.	265-267
And I think every single one of those has useful messages about living together, getting on with fellow man, getting on with the planet, the universe. Coming to a place of peace and acceptance of one's self. They've also come along with huge prejudices and edicts.	147-153
And that's their link, and that's fine, great. The fact that it's separated from other religions, one religion separates from another religion separates from another religion I find difficult, divisive in itself at the core.	637-642
There's great joy to be had in listening to a rousing chorus of gospel music.	614-616
There's great certainty in the repetition of walking up to receive the bread.	618-620

Ridiculous things. You've got the Anglican Church at the moment up in arms. Women priests, no women priests, gay, not gay. All divisive. All man made. All the difference between this person and that person. So there's no link there.	662-667
Organised religions tend to purport to a path to a god, and I think that the divisiveness of the separatism which goes on within religions actually just breaks that link, because for me the link is a god, peace or whatever.	628-633
I am an openly gay man, with kids and whatever, but I don't shout it from the rafters in Nigeria, because there are a lot of religious zealots who would take great exception. Now I have no problem with them believing. I have a problem with them acting out on my beliefs.	167-174
Although I do go in for peace sometimes, because it's a quiet place where others worship so within there, there is that link.	622-625
<b>The Spiritual Self</b>	
Spirituality tends to suggest to me that it's about how I conduct myself.... to be in good spirit is to think of others, just for a second, is enough.	702-706
I don't really know what spirituality means. In a modern sense I think it's... there is spirit in everything.	685-687
... and yet is indefinable, so therefore I suppose you'd call that a faith of some kind.	97-99
I think that's defined in the spirit that goes between one human being and another.	34-36
I liked the definition that I was given once, which was particularly germane to recovering alcoholic addicts, which was, 'If I don't take a drink or a drug today and I don't tell a lie that's about as spiritual as it gets.'	690-695
And for that I need an awareness of being.	807-808
But knowing that you're there, and knowing that I'm not alone in, I suppose a spiritual sense, with this link, I can walk through it.	1049-1052
And I had no idea that at that time, that having put out into the universe well it would be nice if... actually all that's happened is that they've asked me back to do some more possibly.	450-454

And therefore you will be affected by the other and therefore you'll hopefully grow to a place of understanding and peace.	291-294
<b>The Higher Power</b>	
It's just a power greater than myself. It's me plus one other. Because that's greater than me.	11-13
I'm very loath to start making it specific images of this or that or whatever because that could change, and actually in itself God is everything, a higher power is everything and is nothing.	754-759
I think it differs for everybody. I think that's an interpretation. You wouldn't be doing this research with all these people if you thought it was all going to be the same, would you?	814-818
Sometimes it's just the chair I'm sitting on. It holds my weight, and it... no matter what's going on in my head it's fairly sturdy.	4-7
I'm not fond of making it things that somebody can come and chop down. I marvel at the brilliance of an old oak tree but I don't want to make it my higher power. It is everything.	745-749
I very much go along the lines of why should I know what a higher power is? If it's a higher power it's obviously on a higher scale than me, so maybe it's not my business.	25-30
You don't need to have a belief in any sort of god on those levels. I find it quite easy to not have that, yet have a higher power.	828-831
I have a belief in a higher power and scepticism about religions.	133-134
... there will be people who will try and bend it to whatever, to their own particular ilk of ... and that's fine for them.	835-838
And that's as far as my definition of it goes, I don't need to delve too far into it because I find that having... I suppose I'm a doubting Thomas.	76-79
<b>Superordinate Theme 3 – Being and Recovery</b>	
<b>The Alcoholic Self</b>	

I've never met somebody in recovery who wasn't... that old saying of, 'Show me an alcoholic and I'll show you a man in search of God.' I suppose it's true in a way, or in search of peace, whatever you want to call it.	79-84
Just getting to a point where you don't want to live. I wouldn't describe it anymore than getting to a place of despair.	505-508
And I sat on the beach, and the sun was going down, I'd read my book, I'd been in the sea a few times. I sat there and watched the sun going down and thought, 'Yeah, why don't you just walk into the water and kill yourself?' So there's still that bit of me that's going, 'Argh, not satisfied. It's not beautiful enough, it's not whatever.	790-798
It was an uncomfortability with self.	537
...because I 'm a person of extremes, so I go between those two and I don't have the balance, or a place of peace.	467-470
It was how I reacted to those events, and a fear that ran throughout that. It's not something I could have named or said or done anything about. And it's really only through, I think, hindsight that you get to see that.	540-545
I remember being drunk on the top floor of a multi-story car park, an open air car park, on the... I don't know, fifth or sixth floor of this thing on the roof tops, looking out over Bristol late at night, getting back two o'clock in the morning, being drunk and kicking the few cars that were there and swearing at the heavens and berating a god if there was one.	230-239
I don't think my alcoholism was caused by any of the events that happened.	514-515
<b>The Sober Self</b>	
It was necessary for me to become sober, it was necessary for me to come out, it was necessary for me to strive to be a good dad.	971-974
The sponsor who took me through the steps. All he said was, 'See what you can bring to the situation rather than what you can take away from it.'	903-906
Then I need never drink again, because it's quite simple, I'm a common or garden drunk. I'm not God and I'm not the Devil.	1017-1020
...it was all about the link between knowing others and getting... the extremes I suppose of their lives, and understanding a bit about that, and reaching out and	328-333



having that connection.

I don't think I would ever have come out had I not got sober, which is a huge change. 932-934

Being honest. It's about being honest. And that's why I think if I'm honest today then I won't need to drink, I won't need to drug, I won't need to shy away from what I need to do, no matter what others think of me. 984-989

## **Superordinate Theme 4 – Well-Being**

### **The Courageous Self**

Facing up to your demons. Facing up to everything you're scared of. 1028-1029

I think it's... it is about having strength to call, to ask for. It is about having the strength to, as in that poem Love Dogs to continually cry 'Allah, Allah.' And it is about having that... yeah, it's about reaching. 580-585

Not necessarily to understand it, but to know that... It's difficult because you bounce between being a very doubting Thomas type person to knowing that there is something there and time spent on bended knee as such, asking, even though it's not a god that I can understand or can name or whatever, I am taking the action, and that in itself is the strength. 588-596

And in just that calling, in just that asking there is a bond created and in that creation of that bond, from both sides, whether you get an answer or not, there is something that is great within that. 71-76

To truly be yourself. And I'm not saying I know what that is, but I do know that there are certain fundamentals that... There was no need anymore to lie. 1083-1086

### **The Free Self**

And for me that allows for the fact that there is not going to be any opening up of the sky or any great edict given by somebody here or elsewhere that will tell me how to live. 100-104

Well being free is about being able to be the best you that the HP intended. 980-981

It gets you a place where you don't have to keep looking over your shoulder, 566-573

going, 'Oh my god, I did it again. I've done something again. ' It gets you to a place where you don't have to think you're a bad person, because you've gone against your received morals as opposed to your own moral code.	
I'm quite happy to have discovered that I'm on the outside of an outsiders' club.	189-191
Well, I don't think I've ever fitted in to any category. I like to joke that I'm multiply blessed, I'm a black, gay dad, recovering alcoholic, addict, blah blah blah, the list goes on.	128-132
I love taking part, I love being part of the reaching out, but it is about an individual recovery, it's not about having a sect of people that will follow my edict.	866-869
I think that the literature remains the same, and at least within the big book and other bits of AA literature there's nothing desperately controversial in terms of pinning you down.	822-826
It's about coming to an acceptance of self, and through that growing enough to be able to be in a place of peace, go, 'This is alright actually. '	559-562
I always say, 'Whoever's in my bedroom is my business. Unless I invite you in there it's none of your business. So please stay out of it.	179-182
There's no need anymore to try and be something for others, try and be just some other... whatever I thought would be more comfortable. This will fix me. That will fix me.	1087-1091
<b>The Centred Self</b>	
There's a thing on the back of the coin, 'To thine own self be true.' Shakespeare's quote, and yeah, it is about that.	992-995
So I think you are in search of God, I think you are in search of a... well I prefer to call it a peace, rather than a god, a place where you're comfortable, within your own skin and within the world.	213-218
I still fly of the handle every so often. The difference being that I will actually stay my ground as well. I recently had a huge argument with my son. My ground was right.	912-916
I don't think I'm surer of myself, I think I'm... I'm always willing to ask now about what I believe, and to reform my opinion, which is good, but if something is... if I made a decision on something having taken advice, and I think that's the right	922-930

decision, I don't back down just because of fear of what another person will think or want.	
Despite what I thought, actually there was a fundamental truth within who I am, and to get to peace I had to accept that, stop trying to be other things.	1078-1081
It's just what it is, but within that I want a place... I have a place of ... there is a place of peace where I can be at relative harmony with all those... you know.	110-114
I suppose in a way helping to define for me, through my interest in others and my links with others, who I was.	335-338
I think if I had a strong sense of Christopherness, whatever that is, I probably would be in a natural place of peace rather than trying to find peace.	198-201
<b>Superordinate Theme 5 – Understanding Being</b>	
<b>The Limited Self</b>	
Because all that is my ego putting me back in the god position.	483-484
And how can you fix it. There are some things that are just unfixable. And one of them is your humanity.	379-381
Yeah, reaching out for help, reaching out to say I'm not omnipresent, I'm not the bees knees as such, I need help.	69-71
But if I swim out far enough I then start to get a little panicky in the water. And I think of the water and I think of how much bigger it is than me. That in itself, it's huge.	769-773
It's about, I suppose, accepting that there is that thing which cannot be defined, which is all powerful, which together holds a strength that I don't have on my own.	94-97
...and both remaining sober, because the power of that relationship, the power of that link, which is not definable in any concrete terms, is greater than either of us on our own.	39-43
I am one, yeah. Amongst many.	605
Yes, accepting my humanity. And that's... I don't know, they say most children think they're omnipresent. Maybe it's just that I've never grown up, I don't know.	488-492
Come back to today because you have no control over this and what is it that you	407-412

want to control? You're trying to wrest control out of a situation that you've got no control over whatsoever.	
The most well rounded people I presume would realise at some point that they're not omnipresent and the rest of the world exists, and there is something greater.	492-495
<b>The Surrendered Self</b>	
Surrendering. Yeah, that's a moveable feast. I think that comes and goes.	342-344
So you have to eventually lay down your arms. You have to stop fighting.	383-384
To get to that place of despair, and I suppose abject loneliness, you then can only reach out or die.	363-366
Rebellious. Ego-driven. All those things. It was either surrender or keep trying to depose.	1071-1073
And actually just stop trying so bloody hard.	1099-1100
I consciously have to make an effort to surrender to that link. And I suppose that's what I wish would come naturally.	344-347
Sometimes it's... It's easier to do when your back's up against the wall. Because there's no choice. Climb down from the cross as such.	355-358
Initially it's... I don't know if it's saving yourself, it's putting your hands up and going, 'Okay, do you know what? Maybe I need to accept that I can't do this thing on my own.	369-373
And I have to let go of either thinking that it'll all turn to shit, which is a very common thought for me, that it won't happen, or it's all going to work swimmingly and watch out Will Smith because here I come.	460-465
Mainly stopping fighting with myself. That's what it really means to me, don't fight myself.	1001-1003